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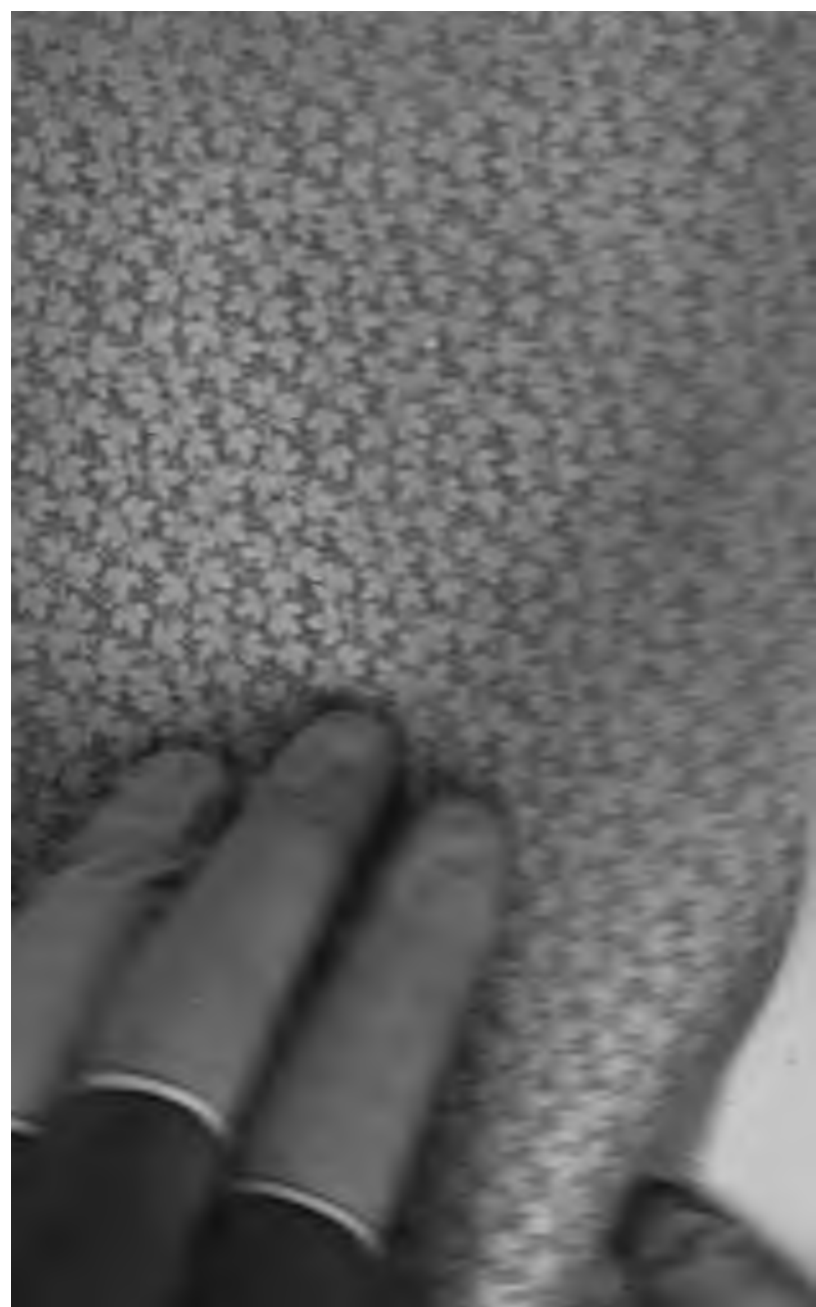
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fancy work, just enough to show off her pretty hands, looked up,—

‘How do you mean, mamma? One can soon tell if a man means anything.’

‘My dear, you cannot with such a man as the one we are speaking of—Albyn Castleton. Those brilliant cavalier sort of fellows pay “attentions” to every pretty woman they know, so that no one can be sure she is the one most admired. At this minute, you could not really be sure whether he is most attracted by you, or Mrs Bury-Talmer, or any other belle in our range; why, even the other day at the Parthenon—did you see?—he threw bouquets to both Kavanagh and La Mara, and each equally costly.’

‘Didn’t want anyone to gossip, I suppose,’ said Helen, with a sneer.

‘Perhaps; but, of course, clever and more experienced as Kavanagh is, he, like the rest, must see that that Italian

is in every way the beauty and genius—the master.’

And Lady Caroline got up and walked the length of the apartment twice, then pausing by the fire—for in April it is always cold in England—she said, in a vexed manner,—

‘I wish it were the elder brother, Reginald, instead. Albyn is well off *now*, but I believe his property is his own, and he is so wild and dissipated—plays so high and carelessly—’

‘I don’t believe half of it,’ said Helen, flushing up; ‘and he has been so much abroad, I am sure no one can really say what he is or is not. Of course he sows wild oats now, but of course when he marries he will draw in.’

‘Will he!’ said Lady Caroline, with a sardonic laugh; ‘that’s a pretty fancy of two-and-twenty, my love; but since you like him the best of the eligible *partis*,

I say nothing on that score ; it's more your business than mine. I, of course, shall take care that he makes handsome settlements, besides your own little fortune.'

'Besides,' added Helen, 'I don't see why, so that there is some money, I shouldn't marry to please myself. I am not like a girl who has nothing at all.'

Lady Caroline set her teeth suddenly and sharply, and turned away. Then she said curtly,—

'The sooner you see the necessity then, and bring Albyn Castleton to the point, the better. Your precious uncle, William Dysart, ran through too much of his fortune to leave more than half behind.'

'I never quite understood,' said Helen, after a pause, 'which broke off the marriage—he, William Dysart, or Miss Carruthers.'

There was an almost nervous move-

ment of Lady Caroline's cold fingers, as she said,—

‘Both—it was mutual; she heard of some extra *roué* escapade abroad, and wrote to him releasing him; he had written to her giving her up. The letters crossed.’

‘Didn't she know what a scapegrace he was, mamma?’

‘Oh! dear no—oh, no,’ repeated Lady Caroline, with that sardonic laugh again; ‘she was very young and brought up in the country, where she heard nothing of his doings. Your grandmother took care of that too, for she thought he would reform if he married. It was her last illness that brought him back post-haste from abroad, and then after her death this story reached England.’

‘And Miss Carruthers too?’ said Helen, with a keen glance at her mother.

‘And—Amabel Carruthers too,’ repeated

Lady Caroline slowly, with a cold, hard smile; 'that broke up the engagement. He was lying ill then.'

'But he died not long after that, mamma?'

'Yes; of the typhoid fever; I nursed him myself. There was no hope for him from the first, poor fellow.'

'Did Amabel care for him, mamma? Would she have forgiven him if he had lived?'

'Possibly,' said Lady Caroline deliberately; 'if I had been fool enough to allow such meeting unawares. Girls are such weak fools sometimes, that men think they can do what they like with them. Still, he would not have married her, I think. He was not so lost as that.'

The last words puzzled Helen a little.

'Do you mean, mamma, that he felt too utterly unworthy of her after his last escapade?'

‘Exactly, my love,’ said Lady Caroline, biting her lips, as if she had nearly said too much; ‘but I don’t think she broke her heart for him, for she married a year after his death. There now,’ added her ladyship, throwing herself into a *fauteuil*, ‘let us leave the past and come to the more important present.’

‘In what way, mamma?’

‘I must give a *soirée* soon, and ask La Mara to recite.’

‘Ask her!’ exclaimed Helen; ‘why not wait at least till we see how she takes? She is, and is likely to be, in such a fast set—so very Bohemian.’

‘My dear,’ said Lady Caroline composedly, ‘there is an immense deal of topsy-turvydom now-a-days in almost all grades of society, and I have neither the wish nor power to go against tide; besides, she is Eustache’s niece, and he has a position of his own here as in Paris, and

one, too, which, within its range, cannot be slighted—why should it? He is a most agreeable man, and he gathers about him agreeable, if somewhat mixed, people. We can touch Bohemia without rushing into its centre. Margherita La Mara will take, both socially and professionally, I can see; she will, too, be an excellent foil to you, especially as no one you would favour could dream of more than flirting with her,—certainly not—*marrying* her. Lastly, I don't choose the Marquise, and especially Mrs Bury-Talmer, to be the first to air her.'

'There is some visitor,' said Helen, as the sound of a double knock reached the drawing-room, and a few minutes later the footman threw open the door, announcing —

'Mrs Bury-Talmer.'

Mrs Bury-Talmer was about thirty, undeniably a pretty woman, bright, clever,

good-hearted, rapid certainly, but with nothing the least bit ugly about her—a favourite with the men, of course, and with most of the women. Her husband was a learned disciple of half-a-dozen ologies—very studious—had a study full of specimens; called beetles, or anything with an undue allowance of legs, fellow-creatures, and probably, as Castleton had wickedly said, only married because he had mistaken his wife for a particularly rare and charming specimen of the butterfly, which being a little too large to pin in one way, he had pinned in the only way open to him. He rarely came to the surface even to breathe, but he was pleased for her to enjoy herself, and she laughed at him, teased him (he was much her senior), was fond of him, and confided to Margherita, to whom she had taken a great fancy, that he was the most wonderful man she knew.

‘I thought I should quite get into your black book if I passed your door again,’ said she, shaking hands ; ‘so here I am.’

‘Good girl,’ said Lady Caroline ; ‘and how is the professor ?’

Mrs Bury-Talmer went off into a peal of laughter, which was quite infectious enough to set Helen off too.

‘Oh, he is very well, thanks,—such fun ! Fancy yesterday his actually turning up at luncheon, and the joke of it was, that there were just about the most larky, racketty lot of us tumbled together that ever Fate contrived — Castleton, La Mara, Tom Tillotson, and two or three more equally “chice spirits.” I wonder we didn’t nearly take off my dear old hubby’s learned head ; but he smiled benignly on all our sallies ; and then he thought Castleton was talking of specimens, because he caught him saying something about a “Butterfly and the Parthenon Violet,”—that’s what he has

dubbed us, impudent scamp—and he got fairly fogged when we laughed so much.’

‘Too bad of you all,’ said Helen; ‘he will wish that such violets bloomed elsewhere.’

‘Not he, my dear; he is good nature itself, and, I’m certain, quite enjoyed our chaff, though it did fog him. And then Castleton declared he must see “L’Une et l’Autre,”—he would take us both (fancy—Darby and Joan like) that night.’

‘You don’t mean it?’ exclaimed Lady Caroline.

‘I do, though,’ nodding her head. ‘Castleton can get anybody to do what he likes, you know; and he came for us too, carriage and all.’

‘Wasn’t poor Dr Bury-Talmer bored to death?’ asked Helen.

‘My dear, he enjoyed it hugely, though he was very tired. He got quite excited in the scene where Violette almost stabs

the Duchesse. He thought La Mara exquisite; but—it was such fun!—he said it wasn't a nice part for such a young thing to play; he shouldn't like his daughter to do it! I called him an old prudish fogey. How amused Castleton and I were! I met him just now on my way here.'

'Did you?'

'Yes; I had pulled up to speak to La Mara, who overtook me on horseback, when up came my lord, also mounted, on that splendid Arab of his. We chatted a bit, and then, of course, he asked to escort her, and they rode off together.'

The slightest possible toss of Helen's head did not escape the secretly delighted speaker. She added,—accepting the microscopic Sèvres cup of tea—

'They have just got her photos out in Regent Street. She did not want it, but Eustache would have it. She's taken in the splendid velvet dress she wears in the

last scene. I bought one for my theatrical album, of course. Ah, here are more visitors !'

They dropped in now, and after a little while, Mrs Bury-Talmer took her leave.

'You'll come to my At Home, next Wednesday, won't you ?' she said. 'La Mara is going to recite Tom Tillotson's new comic piece, for the first time. Do come ; ta-ta.'

And away she went, perfectly innocent of the vexation her last speech had left behind. After all, she was the first in the field to 'star' the rising actress, and with the very newest thing, too, of witty Tom Tillotson ! Poor Lady Caroline !





CHAPTER II.

FIRST IN THE FIELD.

MIGHTY Beethoven's musical life has been very properly divided into three periods, to each of which belong such distinctive characteristics and tinges of thought, that few musicians could easily mistake the compositions of one period for the other.

So too it is, I think, with the lives of many of us in a yet stronger and yet more marked degree of cycles ; looking back on which one actually feels and sees one's - self at another past period as a different being, though, like the great

master's music, the same thread is wound through all the changes of harmony and melody.

Markedly so had been Margherita's life. Its first period, her city Arab existence ; its second, her police-agent life under Emerson ; its third, her Paris life—continued now in London ; her theatrical life through which the other thread still ran. The sense of this, of the startling contrast, came upon her more forcibly than ever as she came forward at Mrs Bury-Talmer's 'At Home,' to recite Tom Tillotson's new piece. Scarcely seven years ago, she had slipped from a thieves' den to die in the snow on a door-step ; and now—

She glanced over the faces before her, and met the dark eyes and smile of one face that had smiled down upon her years ago, and filled her childish heart with the lasting, passionate love that lay there still—her all. It was no dream—no un-

reality; she was the same, however changed the casket—the Blackbird.

And then she was speaking — conversation, even whispers, ceased as the recitation went on. The piece was very clever, and she made its comedy simply exquisite; every inflexion of the rich, flexible voice, every look and action, were irresistible, and the audience were convulsed with laughter.

The author, Tom Tillotson, was delighted; and when the guests gathered about them both, complimenting, praising, begging for another piece, he declared that the honours were due to the fair reciter, who had made everything of the poem; he didn't believe he meant so much himself.

'Oh, Tom, Tom, you humbug!' exclaimed Castleton, laughing. 'Don't you believe his modesty, ladies and gentlemen; it's not indigenous, I assure you.'

‘Oh, I don’t believe him!’ said the actress merrily. ‘He’ll pop round to the green-room to-night and scold me, I dare say. Don’t protest you couldn’t scold a lady, Mr Tillotson, because we all know better.’

Of course there was a good deal more chaff and badinage, and then somebody sang, during which Lady Caroline came up to Margherita and said that she was going to issue cards for an ‘At Home’ evening next week, and she hoped that Mademoiselle La Mara would come after the play was over, both as a guest and professionally.

She should be very happy to do so, if Madame pleased, the actress answered; and then Addison came up,—

‘My dear, in such pleasant society time slips by,’ showing his watch; ‘and, alas for stern necessity! you and I have got to dine and get to the theatre. Have you your carriage here?’

‘Yes; may I give you a lift on your way, or rather you had better come in to dinner with us, and we can go down together.’

She took his arm, bowed to Lady Caroline, and turned away to take leave of the hostess.

‘Not going, my dear?’ said that little lady. ‘Mr Addison, it’s lucky for you that duelling days are out of date, or you would have enough challenges in hand by morning light for carrying off La Mara. What say you, Castleton?’

Albyn laughed.

‘I’m not sure I won’t do something desperate even now,’ he said, as Margherita gave him her free hand, with a bright smile and ‘Good-bye.’

For a second—just a second—his hand clasped hers more closely than in a mere passing hand - shake — perhaps unconsciously—too slight for any perception but

her own; but still—still, her heart gave a quick throb, though she was too used to control for even a glance, or the smile and jest to leave her lips. Bah! what if it were not fancy? What was it but the homage he, like the rest, gave to the beautiful actress,—only an actress, fair mark for careless homage, which meant nothing, or if it did, meant what she could not accept. She knew enough of all that—knew her position under all its gilding, and her cynical philosophy accepted the world as she found it, and gathered what honey she could—perhaps too recklessly, if she must needs take in the bitterness with it.

Why should she think him better or different from others about her? What really did she know of him, except that which made him certainly much the same as the careless, racketsy set in which she mixed? Why should she be conscious

of such happiness with him, and feel such bitter pain to think that perhaps, ay, that of course, he only held her as others must—the *diva*—to admire, ride, drive, flirt, amuse themselves with ; be in the seventh heaven if she was their partner in the dance or at play ; and then—toss her name from lip to lip ?

Why should her heart still whisper,—‘Oh, no, no, not this one, he is not quite “like others ?”’ Why ? because that young heart had clung since childhood to its one love—its ideal ; because, and she knew it, poor child, the childish, clinging faith had grown with her to the woman’s faith and love—whatever he was to others, to the world, she at least had seen a glimpse within the casket, and she, who had never had one being to love since her mother died, loved this one man, whether he ever cared for her, wrongly or rightly. It was part of her very life,



as the Hamadryad of its tree. It might perhaps, some day, be but a buried corpse,—

‘Down, down, deep in the depths below ;’

what else could it be with such a gulf between them? But while the sun shone in her lonely, dark path she must live in its warmth and light, reckless of what the future might bring. Did he ever remember—ever think of that poor little Blackbird he had sheltered in his rich nest that night long ago. How should he? He had probably forgotten the whole episode in his bright, gay life.

Had he quite? Where was it then he had seen those dark, haunting eyes, heard, though so changed, the ring of that rich, pathetic voice—

‘Like a song from out the distance?’

These were memories that wanted but the touch to spring into vivid life.

'There are thoughts thou canst not banish,
There are shades that will not vanish.'

Would he have wished them to do so?
Hardly, when he should find their beautiful original at his side—a living ideal, a human reality.





CHAPTER III.

THE PHOTOGRAPH OF WILLIAM DYSART.

IT was not till nearly eleven o'clock, the night of Lady Caroline's *soirée*, that handsome Albyn Castleton entered that lady's spacious, well-filled, but never overcrowded rooms. He knew that of course the one who really attracted him there could not possibly get away from the theatre till about that time, and he had no wish to arrive long before. Yes, his *diva*, he admitted to himself with a half laugh and half sigh—reckless the one, regretful the other—the conflict of better

and worse, between which Thought and Future were determinately put aside and shut out. Her youth, her rare beauty and gifts, her strange charm, fascinated him as no woman had ever yet done, at once and deeply, more deeply than he knew himself, man of the world as he was, and he threw himself across her path, into her society, revelling in the present, and not looking to an end—shutting his eyes to the future in very defiance of fate and self. Little had fortune's favourite been taught of principle of that high stamp, or mastery of his own heart and strong passions—so little, that whenever the battle came between heart and principle, God help him, and the one who would suffer for his temptation, if it were yielded to, and the battle lost.

The actress came in a little after eleven with Addison, and there was a

The Photograph of William Dysart. 25

little sensation and indefinite buzz heard near the door, which made Castleton turn, while Madame D'Amville, to whom he was talking, exclaimed,—

‘Ah voilà! it is La Mara; I thought so. See how Mr Pierrepont goes at once to join the group of her admirers. I thought he was quite in Miss Dysart’s train, but he seems épris in that other quarter of late.’

‘One must pay devoirs at the shrine of beauty, Marquise,’ said Albyn, with a glance and bow, which gave the gay reply a personal point; ‘and here one is in a parterre of fair flowers.’

The Parisienne laughed, tapped him with her fan, and said he made ‘her feel as if she were in dear Paris, little dreaming that the very man she touched, and the very girl she admired were, in fact, the actual cause of her banishment from the gay city.

‘Ah, there is Mrs Bury-Talmer,’ and away she went.

‘I wonder,’ said a dashing-looking young man, touching Castleton as he was turning away, ‘I wonder whether Charlton Pierrepont will try to-night to make good his wager.’

‘What wager, Anstruther?’

‘Oh, at Dancre’s last night she came on the *tapis* after the play had run pretty high, and Pierrepont wagered that he would have her on his drag at the turn-out.’

‘Did he?’ said Castleton, with a laugh, but his dark eyes flashed; ‘who took the wager?’

‘I did, my dear fellow; he’ll lose; I think.’

‘So do I,’ said Castleton dryly, and turned away to greet Margherita. Was it his fancy—offspring of the wish—that the beautiful eyes that so haunted him,

The Photograph of William Dysart. 27

lighted up yet more as he clasped the little hand, whose mere touch quickened his every pulse, or that her smile was brighter as she turned from Pierrepont to him?

‘It seems an age since I saw you,’ Albyn said, softly, bending down a little; ‘and yet counted by hours it is only a few days.’

‘Don’t you count time by hours?’ the actress asked, archly.

‘Not when I am at your side,’ he answered, putting her hand on his arm; ‘it seems to fly then without counting or heed.’

‘You are a Gascon after all,’ laughed Margherita, as they moved down the rooms amongst the guests; ‘or else I must be a very mischievous companion for you.’

‘A very dangerous one, perhaps, fair lady,’ said Castleton lightly, but under the

gay surface of *galanterie* there lay something that for one second sent a slight flush across the soft, dark Italian face, and made the bright eyes droop with a sudden shade of almost pain that puzzled Castleton, even while that wild heart of his beat faster. He drew her to a table covered with exquisite trifles, and two or three photograph albums and engravings.

‘They are all talking, or listening to Miss Dysart’s singing,’ he said, ‘so I may show you some of these, may I not? Lady Caroline rather prides herself on her collection, I think. Ah! that “Grosvenor” green album contains her family photos.’

‘Does it? I should like to see it, do you know, just because I heard one of the family spoken of when I was a child.’ The actress sat down and opened the book, asking, with a glance up into his face as he stood leaning a little over her

The Photograph of William Dysart. 29

chair, 'I hope you can tell me who some of these are.'

'I hope so, since you wish it, Diva Margherita; my elder brother, Rex, knew some of the Dysarts well—Ah! those, of course, you know.'

'Oh yes;—Lady Caroline and Miss Dysart. She is very lovely, is she not?'

'Yes; a lovely English rose,' said Albyn, but his lips smiled as his glance went from the photograph to the face above it. There was no comparison between them to him. She turned the page, and two decidedly handsome men were presented, —something alike, one, the handsomest, with a somewhat dissipated look, the girl thought. She looked up the question—'Who are these?' to her companion.

'That one to the left is Lady Caroline's late husband, Herbert Dysart,' Castleton said; 'the other his brother William.'

Margherita started slightly, and for full

a minute looked attentively at the photo. She remembered through all these years what she had heard Featherstone say of this William Dysart.

‘It is an odd face,’ she said, slowly; ‘very odd.’

‘Why, Mademoiselle? in what way?’

‘I hardly know how to define what I mean,’ said the actress. ‘It is certainly a dissipated face, but it is not an altogether bad face. I could fancy—’

She paused.

‘You could fancy—’ repeated Albyn, anxious to get at her thought.

‘That a woman might love that man in spite of all his faults, however deep they were,’ she said, with that transient flush again. ‘He was engaged, too, was he not?’

‘Yes, but it was broken off mutually not long before he died—indeed, after he was taken dangerously ill—and Amabel

Carruthers married within a year—married a cousin.'

'I wonder if she cared for him—this Mr Dysart?'

'I don't know, nor did Rex, my brother, She was a green country girl, and, I suppose,' said Albyn, with a half-cynical smile, 'thought that the escapade abroad, of which she was duly apprised, was too awful for any pardon; her saint (*she* deemed him) had fallen.'

Margherita's lip curled in cynical scorn. What a fool this Amabel must have been to think any man a saint.

'Who opened her very "green" eyes?' she said.

Castleton laughed, glanced across to where Lady Caroline sat, and said significantly,—

'Well, you see, William was the elder brother—and Herbert left a widow and child.'

‘Ah! exactly—I understand!’ said the girl, smiling. ‘Some one found out stories and took care to let it reach her. Then William died unmarried?’

‘Yes; and his sister-in-law nursed him in that typhoid fever.’

Emerton’s agent gave a quick look towards Lady Caroline, with a flash of suspicion that was simply the momentary outcome of her dark police experience, not any definite thought; but mere transient flash as the expression was, Castleton’s quick, keen glance caught it, and he laughed.

‘Oh, no, no; it was all right—but of course Helen inherited what property he left—a good deal, I fancy.’

‘How long ago did he die?’ asked La Mara.

‘Quite sixteen years ago, nearer seventeen, I think. Is M. Eustache coming in to-night in time for the carpet

dance which Lady Caroline promised us presently ? ’

‘He is out elsewhere ; I came from the Parthenon with Addison in his carriage,’ she said, rising. ‘I did not know we were to dance to-night at all.’

‘No ? Then you are not pre-engaged, so I may claim one—two—or—’

‘Two is enough, Mr Castleton,’ she interrupted, shaking her head. ‘You are of a very encroaching disposition, I am afraid.’

‘So much so where you are concerned,’ said he, bending down, ‘that I will go a step further, and decline to take any refusal to your acceptance of the box seat on my drag at the first turn out. Butterfly will be one of the party,—you must say yes, diva Margherita.’

How could she refuse him, of all men ? Why should she, just because she was an actress, and the world might wag

its tongue? it would do that whatever she did; and what was it to her if it called her at least fast and reckless? It was *en regle* if Mrs Bury-Talmer was there; and if she declined, some other—perhaps Helen Dysart—would take it.

‘*La femme qui hesite est perdue,*’ he whispered, boldly; ‘you will honour me?’

‘I suppose I must, then,’ she answered, glancing up; but her eyes fell under the gaze they met for that half-second, and she added, ‘but Lady Caroline is signing to me, I think. You know I have got to recite,’ and leaving him, with a bow, she crossed to the hostess, while Castleton, with a triumphant smile on his lip, made his way to Gus Anstruther and touched his shoulder.

‘Pierrepont has lost his insolent bet, and you won it,’ he said. ‘*La Mara* will not be on his drag.’

‘By Jove! what a lark! On whose then?’

‘On mine,’ was the cool answer, as Castleton turned on his heel.

‘Whew!’ went Gus, under his breath; ‘Pierrepoint hasn’t a chance if you choose to pit yourself against him. I wonder what the fair Helen will say; she’ll hardly like to be cut out by an actress. And I wonder if Castleton—’

He broke off with a little laugh to himself as the crowd parted and the Italian took up a position for a recitation. Lady Caroline knew well how to keep things going, and her evenings never flagged. The Italian was encored, but laughingly declined it, and Lady Caroline suggested that they should adjourn to the supper-room, and then have a few carpet dances in an impromptu sort of fashion, which arrangement met with universal approbation.



CHAPTER IV.

‘WAS SHE THE SAME?’

HARLTON PIERREPOINT had succeeded in securing La Mara for the last valse, and when it was over he took that opportunity of eagerly preferring his request for the honour of her company on his drag. Alas for his hope!

‘I am sorry that I must disappoint you,’ she answered, ‘but I am already engaged. Mrs Bury-Talmer and I, amongst others, are Mr Castleton’s guests for the first meet.’

Pierrepoint reddened with anger—the

jealous anger against a more successful rival, and he bowed, rather stiffly, his chagrin not being improved by the handsome offender coming up at that moment with Margherita's rich mantle over his arm.

'A thousand pardons,' he said, 'but Addison is waiting below by his carriage and sent me for you, as he must go, he says—may I ?'

'Thanks ;' she rose up quickly, as he threw the mantle about her and took his arm. 'Good-night, Mr Pierrepont, thanks for your offer—see you, I daresay, before the meet ; where is Lady Caroline ?'

And she moved towards the door with Albyn.

'Not going, Mademoiselle ?' said her ladyship.

'Mr Addison has sent for me,' said the actress, laughingly, 'so I must depart too'—the room was thinning fast now ; 'please

make my adieux to Miss Dysart and the Marquise.'

And they passed on down the stairs to the carriage.

'Good girl,' said the manager, smiling; 'step in too, Castleton, and we shall make a proper trio—owner, manager, and artiste.'

'Thanks; I'll follow you, then, Addison,' and the young man sprang in after his friend. It was a few more minutes of happiness—to be with her still, and he knew it, though he would not look within or attempt to analyse himself. He was yet more fascinated each time he was with her, yet more drawn on by the vague, haunting, struggling memory of something familiar in this girl, something surely seen and heard before, if only in his dreams; it grew upon him day by day, and kept his thoughts continually with her. What was it? where was it?



What and who was this girl? Eustache called her his niece, and had once remarked that her mother was his half sister, as his mother had made a second marriage with an Italian; but Castleton did not much believe the whole story, though, for some reason of her own, it was plain that it suited the young actress to be so passed.

Albyn had been a frequenter of the Rue Trois-Etoiles long before the sudden appearance of this niece; and it was odd, he thought, that he should never have heard the least allusion from Eustache to any such a sister, living or dead, or to a niece so beautiful as Margherita was, and must have been as even quite a child. He watched her face now as she leaned back in the carriage, the long lashes drooping on the dark cheek, the careless, even reckless look which it too often wore, giving place to one of weariness, and yet a

sweet, almost child-like expression of restful quiet that seemed for the moment to give the beautiful young face almost the expression a child wears when it is asleep. Such a look as he had seen once, years—eight years ago, on the face of one sleeping child, which brought back, with a flash of recollection that made him start, the little Arab child, asleep on his velvet couch, that bitter winter's night long ago.

‘Absurd,’ he muttered between his teeth. ‘I must be mad for the thought to come! Impossible!’

The carriage stopped before the very house in Upper Grosvenor Street, and he was thanking his companions for coming out of their way, and bidding them good-bye. Then the carriage drove off again, and he passed into the house, and up to his dressing-room.

‘Impossible!’ he might say to himself,

as he paced restlessly to and fro the room; that flash of thought had linked the poor little wretched Arab, whom he had never forgotten, with the brilliant and rising actress who had so fascinated him—he would admit as much as that to himself. He recalled vividly the Italian child—saw her again almost as if she had been visibly before him, with the great, wistful dark eyes looking up into his as the sweet, childish voice told him they called her “Blackbird,” or more often, “devil,” because she was such an ugly black thing.’ Side by side with this memory-picture stood the living, breathing form and face of Margherita La Mara, and memory and possibility like a gleam of light both gave back the picture as one. The eyes, the vague something that had haunted him the moment ‘Violette’ stepped on to the stage at the Clairon was explained, if, indeed, this

beautiful Mara was but the translation, as it were, of the little starved Italian waif—Blackbird—*his* Blackbird! and the man's wild, undisciplined heart throbbed fast and heavy as he recalled that silver coin which he had hung about the child's neck, and her passionate words, that she should never forget him—that she would die before she parted from that sixpence. Was that what she wore in the tiny gold locket which he had noticed she always had on? She had never shown the least shadow of recognition of him—not in the first moment of their meeting; but then she was a born actress, and could act as well off the stage as on it.

‘It must be,’ he said, with a flash in his dark eyes and a flush on his cheek. ‘I will make sure, and, by Heaven! if it is Blackbird—if she still remembers me!—’

Ah! what then? He stopped, his breast heaved, his breath came quick and pain-

fully, and he flung himself into the easy-chair, covering his face with one slender hand. Did he care for her—did he love her, this girl whose blood—

‘Bah!’ he muttered again; ‘I am a fool to think of the future, or what may or may not be. I *will not* leave her sphere or society; why should I? to leave that damned Pierrepont a clear field—not I, faith; I will seek the sun while I can, and fling care to the winds.’

Ah! proud son of the Castletons, who would not stoop your haughty crest to wed with one on whose birth lay a stain, what right have you to fling care to the winds and try to win her in thoughtless passion, or a reckless love that wilfully shuts its eyes? You would not harm her, or tempt her, or deliberately break her heart or your own, but yet you will rush madly on into the wild tide that may sweep you both away, nor pause

until haply the fatal words 'too late' have been written on two lives. Oh, man! oh, man! in pity, in mercy, let not the very love for you, which has till now been her safeguard, prove her direst enemy, her darkest temptation—even her bitterest curse!





CHAPTER V.

MR EMERTON'S AGENT MAKES A REPORT.

A LITTLE tap-tap at the sometime Inspector Emerton's room door, shortly after he had come down to his office in Square Court, Strand, the next morning. He said 'Come in,' but only glanced up from some papers as the door closed behind some one—a tall, slight figure, in deep black, and closely veiled. The inspector rose up, looking puzzled; but the crape veil was thrown back, and the intruder said, laughing softly,—

'More than half deceived, were you,

Mr Emerton ? There is nothing for simple disguise like deep mourning, is there ?'

'No ; nothing. Sit down, my dear. Certainly you women have the best of us in the matter of disguises.'

'So we have,' answered the actress, taking the seat he drew to the side of his table. 'You wonder, I suppose, what has brought me down here ?'

'Some good reason certainly, La Mara.'

'I don't know that you will think so after all ; it is such a bare, vague idea of a possibility that has flashed across me, more from the general halo of suspicion with which one's mind is soaked—if one may so speak—than from any data at all.'

'Let us hear, child. Your Paris experience has but deepened my reliance on you.'

'Yet I am still at fault in the search for



traces of Anna Ferrara,' she said, almost gloomily.

'My dear girl! But look at the number of years that have elapsed, and no data to start from,' answered Emerton. 'Let's hear what you have to say now.'

Margherita shook off the depression determinately, and said,—

'We know that Anna Ferrara fled nineteen years ago (now) with some Englishman. Well, last night I was at an At Home of Lady Caroline Dysart's, and in the course of the evening I was looking through her family photograph album.'

'With her?' asked the inspector.

'Oh, no; with Mr Castleton. He knew who they all were, and could tell me. One of the family I had by chance heard of years ago—just before I entered your service, in fact; and I was looking out for his photo, to learn more of him.'

'Why?' said Emerton quickly.

His agent shrugged her shoulders.

‘*Mon Dieu!* but I could hardly tell you, except from a kind of professional instinct or curiosity, just because I had heard of him before, and been rather oddly thrown across his relatives.’

‘Ah! so—so. Well, go on—excuse my interruption.’

She bowed slightly, and went on first to minutely describe the photo and the expression which had struck her, and then to repeat all she had learned from Albyn of William Dysart’s character and story.

‘Hum!’ said the inspector, when she paused; ‘it is quite evident that this William Dysart was an—infernal scamp.’

‘Certainly. What else think you of the story, Mr Emerton?’

‘No, no, child,’ said he, smiling; ‘let me first hear your deductions.’

She looked up, and said, leaning one arm on the table,—



‘Deductions would imply a thread of logical reasoning from facts ; but I cannot at present claim that standpoint ; but there are several things in this story which strike me as worthy of attention, as having just possibly some connection with the search in which we are engaged. It is evident that William Dysart’s career was one of more than ordinary wild-oat sowing, and that he closed his dissipations by some act worse than all the rest, because, whatever it was, it made him write himself to Amabel Carruthers, breaking off their engagement *after* he was taken dangerously ill—not before. It was clearly Lady Caroline’s interest, on her daughter’s behalf, that William should die unmarried, and of course, therefore, it was Lady Caroline who knew well how to make full use of information obtained, no doubt, rather from the delirium than remorseful and deliberate confession of her patient. Now

you see all this took place just about a year and a-half after poor Anna Ferrara's flight with an Englishman ; the coincidence of time struck me, and taking all in all, it is certainly just possible that it was William Dysart with whom she fled—probably—poor, unsophisticated convent child!—lured and deceived by a promised or sham marriage. Equally, of course, he would tire of her, and desert her in far less than two years. And so I humbly submit that, in the absolute absence of any other data or trace from the French or Italian side of the question, we might as well adopt this theory as possible, and work back from William Dysart, since neither Mr Castleton, nor M. Croumassier will hear of giving it up.'

Mr Emerton sat for some minutes in deep thought, meditatively stroking his beard.

'Yes, child,' he said at last ; 'but now I think it will be advisable.—Did Mr Cas-

tleton—our one, I mean—know Mr Dysart and Miss Carruthers?’

‘No, he could not have known them much personally, as he was then, remember, only an Eton boy. He is only about thirty now. His brother, Squire Castleton, of Monk’s Royal, I fancy, knew them well.’

‘Ah! exactly. Then,’ said the detective-officer, ‘it is from or through Mr Albyn himself that you can best get at further details, and, perhaps, valuable information.’

‘I!’ said the girl, starting, and drawing a quick breath. ‘But if I speak to him as much as would be necessary about these Dysarts, he would guess at once—suspect that—’

Her chief interrupted her quietly. How should he know the passionate emotion of that young heart, the dread of being despised, the fear of she scarce knew what.

‘Probably he would; and, therefore, to

give yourself perfect scope and freedom of action and speech, you (or I) must tell him the simple fact that you are the agent engaged in his business throughout.'

The actress flushed, then grew perfectly colourless again.

'If I tell him *that*,' she said, clenching her delicate hand under the mantle, 'he will think—guess at once that I am Blackbird, and you promised—'

She stopped.

'My dear child, I keep my promise. Begin simply with the French side—reverse the facts,' said Emerton quietly. 'Tell him that you, Eustache's niece, are M. Michaud's agent; that you found the will, and that, when your information carried the case over here, your chief simply passed you over to me with the case. You need not say that you ever saw me, still less ever were in my service before now; do you see?'

Mr Emerton's Agent makes a Report. 53

‘Yes.’ She rose with a smothered sigh, then added, in a hard, business manner, ‘You shall be obeyed, and, of course, the first thing will be to get at the doctor who attended William Dysart, and Miss, or rather now, Mrs Carruthers, if they are alive. Where shall I see Mr Castleton?’

‘Surely you have plenty of opportunities, my dear girl, so much as you see him.’

‘I have not much chance of seeing him privately, Mr Emerton, as I must for business, except in a manner which would open wide the mouth of scandal, which wags its tongue all too readily about an actress’s name. I am reckless enough of the world, but still, I don’t want to be tossed even out of Bohemia.’

‘Forgive me, La Mara, I spoke hastily. You can see him by appointment at my own house any time you both like. I have my own private room, and, of course, you would take care that my wife should

not know you again. Have you a hansom waiting ?'

'Yes. I am going down to the Parthenon presently, as we are rehearsing for next Saturday's *matinée*. I shall be sure to see Mr Castleton there, and can make the appointment at once, perhaps.'

'Very well, my dear ; or, if you prefer it, I will send him a note asking if he can be at my house at such a time—what suits your professional engagements ?'

The actress caught at that.

'Ah ! thanks ; please do. Name, then, to-morrow evening at seven ; we only play " L'Une et l'Autre " every other night now, you know, and I am not in the alternate piece. You can let me know Mr Castleton's reply.'

'All right. Good morning then.'

'Good morning.'

And his agent went out. Poor child ! How she dreaded the task before her.



CHAPTER VI.

CASTLETON TAKES UP THE GAUNTLET.

HOW do, everybody? Where's Pierrepont? Too awfully stumped out, I suspect, to turn up at all.'

This from Gus Anstruther, the next morning, as he walked into the smoking room of the Polyglot Club. Faces looked up over newspapers, with a nod of the head, or 'How do, old fellow?'—while one asked him, laughing,—

'What's the row, then, about Pierrepont? Has he been crossed in love, or had extra bad luck at the Trois-Etoiles?'

So had Albyn and the other initiated who had known Eustache's famous *salle de jeu* in the Rue Trois-Etoiles, nicknamed the same *ménage* in its transfer to London, and amongst them it was now quite cantly known as the 'Trois-Etoiles,' although Albyn had said once, with a low bow to La Mara, 'there was only one star worth going for.'

Another man now cried out merrily,—

'Ha, ha! both, perhaps, especially if certain bright eyes were near. Weren't you here the other day, Langdale, when he was so cheeky in his bet about the diva of Bohemia?'

'No; but I heard something of it. Wasn't it about the Four-in-Hand?'

'Yes,' answered Anstruther; 'he was bragging as if he were quite a favoured cavalier, and offered a bet of twenty to five that he would have her on his drag, and I took it. Tom Tillotson there heard it all.'

Tom Tillotson looked up over his paper, grinning an amused assent.

‘You’re fly, you are, my boy,’ said he. ‘How did it end?’

‘Why, you were at Lady Caroline’s last night,’ said Gus; ‘weren’t any of the rest of you fellows there?’

Some had, some had not; anyhow, they had not heard the result, they said.

‘Out with it,’ said Langdale; ‘I wasn’t there. Of course, he’s lost the bet.’

‘Of course,’ rejoined Gus, laughing heartily. ‘I never saw a more neat cut-out, by Jove.’

‘The “*belle Bohémienne*” refused him flat, eh?’ cried Langdale.

‘What a hurry you’re in! She had just accepted the box-seat behind the most splendid team her beauty could grace. She will be on Castleton’s drag, with little Bury-Talmer.’

There was a shout of laughter.

‘Ha! ha! what a lark! Of course Castleton would beat Pierrepont at an easy canter, any day.’

‘And when he comes in,’ added Tom Tillotson, ‘he’s only got to pay his money down, like an angel. ’Pon honour, Anstruther, you ought to thank Castleton when he shows up.’

‘What for, my son?’ said a mellow voice, and in walked Albyn Castleton.

‘Talk of the—ahem!’ exclaimed Gus; ‘I’ve got to thank you for winning me my bet last night; and here comes Pierrepont.’

‘To pay it, of course,’ whispered Langdale, behind Albyn’s shoulder, as the latter seated himself on the edge of the table and lighted a cigarette. ‘Pierrepont, you are late; I am afraid you feel crushed by your defeat.’

‘Shut up, you duffer,’ said Albyn, laughing, as Pierrepont turned with a red, angry flush, and rather sharp,—

‘What do you mean?—what defeat?’

‘Why, your rash bet,’ said Anstruther. ‘You laid twenty to five that you’d have the diva on your drag, and Castleton has got her, so stand and deliver your twenty at your earliest convenience.’

‘Oh, now as well as presently,’ said Pierrepont, throwing down two crisp notes and scarcely able to keep his jealous fury under control; ‘only I must say that I do not consider the bet fairly won, except—’ with a sneer and pointed look at Castleton—‘on the plea that *all* is fair in love—and war.’

‘Certainly it is, my son,’ said Castleton coolly, and looking full in the irritated speaker’s face; ‘that is an admitted fact, and as this is a free country, I have, I take it, as much right to ask a lady I admire and respect, for the honour of her company, as she has to give it.’

‘No, you had not,’ retorted Pierre-

point hotly, almost rudely, 'when you knew that another gentleman was going to ask her.'

'Another — gentleman,' repeated the other, with an ironical stress on the noun, but with a dangerous flash in his dark eyes. 'I can see, of course, what your rendering is; but, faith! my code of honour as gentleman does not recognise any betting about a lady's name and favour.'

'A—lady,' repeated Pierrepont, with an insolent sneer, as he turned away, reddening high under the sting. 'It comes well from the owner of the Parthenon, certainly, to so define the diva of the Trois-Etoiles salle—an actress of the Clairon and Odéon, brought over here and put into a leading theatre and leading parts by—'

He was drowned by the indignant cry of 'Shame!' from the men around, each

expecting, in that second, to see him felled to the ground as Castleton sprang to his feet, with such a change in the handsome face as startled those who had never seen below the gay, careless surface—indignation, passion, scathing scorn, only held in check by the strong will and necessity of control, for the very sake of the girl so slandered.

‘I would ask you, Pierrepont, what the devil you mean, and fling you out of the room as you deserve, but that that would give the very colour and *esclandre* you wish to your unmanly and utterly groundless slander of a lady, whom no man here dares affirm without a lie, has ever forfeited that honour which we each claim for our sisters.’

‘Well done, Castleton!’ came very audibly, but Castleton went on, scarcely hearing it, with flashing eyes and a proudly dignified force which carried

the weight of its truth with it. 'But as that unmanly insult has been uttered before you all, of an actress at my theatre, coupling her name with mine in language too deliberately plain to be mistaken, I can only, as a gentleman, distinctly refute that language. Gentlemen—' and the proud dark eyes went straight and clear from face to face, as he turned full towards them; thus backing Pierrepont, 'I give you my word of honour that every word uttered is false. Thanks—hush, please, and hear me out—' for a perfect hum of applause arose, though it subsided as he lifted his hand slightly and went on—'I will not tax your attention for many more minutes; but, since there have been a good many *on dits*, and so much has now been said about the young actress in question and myself, the best thing I can do, on her behalf, to silence scandal, is to state to



you the simple truth of her engagement at my theatre. I happened to be passing through Paris the night when "L'Une et l'Autre" was produced at the "Clairon," and I thought so highly of the whole play and acting that, on my return home, I spoke of it to my best and most intimate friend, Charlie Addison, whose unimpeachable management of the Parthenon I have always endeavoured to second to the best of my ability. I suggested to him, if he also approved the play, that it would tell splendidly here if well translated, *not* adapted; and I added that "he should try and secure the same Violette, as her genius was unmistakable." After that I was again, on and off, abroad, but it was not till comparatively a short time ago that Addison put my suggestion in hand by buying the English copyright of the play, which I then, at his request, translated for performance. Beyond my re-

mark to him, fully two years before, the thing which in fact made Addison stir seriously about this play was a letter from M. Eustache, who had known Addison, it seems, years ago, asking him to use his influence on behalf of his niece, whom he was bringing with him to England. That, gentlemen, and her own genius, placed the diva of the "Trois-Etoiles salle, an actress of the Clairon and Odéon," at the Parthenon theatre in "leading parts,"—not my hand. I was never even introduced to Mademoiselle La Mara, until after the first night's performance of "L'Une et l'Autre," when, of course, I went to the green-room. That is all I have to say.'

All! but it was not all the instantly loosed, applauding tongues about him had to say of his simple, manly defence of the young actress, and it was some seconds before Tom Tillotson, the elder



of them all, stepping forward from the group, said,—

‘I think, gentlemen, that after what has just been said, I shall be but speaking the opinion of each and all, if I say that, as a gentleman, Mr Pierrepont has only one course open to him. I am sure he will not refuse to retract and apologise for words spoken in the haste and heat of chagrin.’

How fiercely Pierrepont cursed Castleton in his heart he best knew, but he saw at once that, unless he accepted the escape offered, he would be cut by every man there; so he had no alternative but to come forward and apologise with what grace he might. But men like this, without generosity, or even passion to excuse their vice, never forget or forgive a defeat—and he did not.

Castleton accepted the apology in his graceful way; the delicate hand just lay

for a second in Pierrepont's palm, and then he turned to chat to Tom Tillotson, just outwardly as if nothing unusual had occurred ; but when, presently, they left together, he linked his arm in the dramatist's, and said, in Galileo's famous words, with a soft, exquisitely sarcastic intonation in the flexible voice,—

‘“ E pur se muove,” Tom.’





CHAPTER VII.

QUICKSANDS.

ALBYN CASTLETON had been utterly vexed at the very outset, more than vexed, by any remark having been made at all about Margherita La Mara ; and this affair which had just taken place at the Polyglot had, against every will of his own, forced him to face, if only for a few minutes, the very thing against which he had determinately shut his eyes—himself ; he would not even now ask himself the question what was, what could, this girl be to him that every passion should be so stirred

and roused on her behalf? What was it that made him still set his teeth and mutter recklessly, 'I *will* see her, and live only in the present; the future must take care of itself?'

Oh, man! oh, man! what, when human heart, and honour, and soul are at stake, and only wild, undisciplined human passions hold the reins of that Phæton's chariot!

But the whole current of his thoughts was changed when, presently, he turned in to his own house, for there lay two letters—one from his elder brother the squire, the other from Emerton. The first was a chatty but not wearisomely long letter, saying that, at his wife's wish, he had taken a furnished house for the season in Hertford Street.

'For you see,' wrote Rex, who was, in fact, half-brother to Albyn, and his elder by full fifteen years, 'that the two

boys' (his sons) 'won't have their holidays till the autumn, and Constance fancied this season in town for a change; so, of course, I said "Yes," and wrote up to Messrs —— for a house, to which we come this week, with sufficient of our own Monk's Royal servants. I know, dear boy, how you would have at once put No. —' (Albyn's house) 'at our service, but a short visit and a regular camp down are very different, and our more sober life would not quite, perhaps, accord with your rackety, London ways; so, don't scold us, dearest brother mine. You know that, personally, *I* don't like town life a bit, in which, as you often say, I am a recreant Castleton—so used poor Will Dysart to chaff. Ah! what a pity he was such a scapegrace! for he had some good in him, and I always thought it a shame that Amabel Carruthers threw him over. By the way, she is in town this year too,

oddly enough, or will be shortly. Have you met her or her husband at all? Well, good-bye, dear boy; see you soon.—Yours ever.—REX.'

'Dear old Rex!' said Albyn, with his soft, sweet smile, 'I don't deserve that he should care about such a scamp as I am. Now for Emerton. I hope to Heaven he has dropped upon some clue, possible or impossible.'

He opened the letter, which was dated from the writer's own domicile, 16 Bretton Street, Bloomsbury, the best part of which he and his wife let in furnished lodgings. The letter ran :—

'DEAR SIR,—If possible, will you call here at seven to-morrow evening, *re* the case in hand. Kindly reply by return, and give the name of Conroy when you call.—Your obedient servant,

'ALFRED EMERTON.'



‘What is in the wind, I wonder?’ thought Albyn Castleton, as he dashed off an affirmative reply, and then rang for Baptiste to post it.

‘Yourself, mind,’ said his master, ‘and at once.’

The discreet and faithful valet bowed in grave silence and retired.

Just on seven the following evening, a hansom pulled up at No. 16 Bretton Street, and out of it sprang Castleton, the stylish denizen of the West End.

‘Wait,’ he told the cabman ; ‘no matter how long I am absent ;’ and he knocked at the door.

It was answered by a trim maid-servant.

‘Is Mr Emerton at home?’

‘No, sir ; was he expecting you?’

‘Yes, my name is Conroy.’

‘That is the name master said, sir ; then will you please step this way?’

She ushered him into the back-parlour,

a small, comfortably-furnished room—evidently the inspector's own private domain.

‘Quite right, my friend,’ said Albyn, at once taking notice that the window was frosted from top to bottom; ‘it would never do for you to be overlooked, even from back-yard windows. Ah, here he comes.’

The door opened and closed. A black-robed, crape-veiled figure was in the room, and paused at the little centre-table, just under the lighted gas-chandelier; gathering up all her strength in that second's pause—conscious of the startled gaze to which the gloomy disguise was no disguise, conscious that it knew the form—its very movements; feeling to its full, cruel bitterness, that for a moment his utter blank surprise held him speechless, the blood bounding in his veins.

‘By heaven, it *is* Margherita! You cannot deceive me! What does it all mean?’

The girl threw off her little velvet cap and close veil as if it stifled her ; but she, too sadly and long used to wear a mask, had regained her self-mastery, outwardly at any rate, at once.

‘ It means simply,’ she said, quietly, and unconscious of the intensity of proud, bitter pain in the soft, low tones, ‘ that you have been sent for by Mr Emerton on the business for which he is responsible to you, to meet the actual working agent, in whose hands it has been for two years —myself.’

‘ Margherita ! you a *police agent* !’ exclaimed Castleton under his breath.

The beautiful head drooped a little, a flush crossed the dark, colourless cheek, as she answered, in the same resolutely-suppressed way,—

‘ Ay ; nothing better — Robert Eustache’s niece and M. Michaud’s agent. Hush ! Hear me : for it is a simple

matter of business in which in truth you employ me. You placed in M. le Préfet Michaud's hand the whole case which Madame Louise de Montmorenci in dying had bequeathed to your charge.'

'Yes.'

It was all he could say ; but as she sat down, indicating an opposite seat, he still stood leaning one arm on the mantelpiece, looking down on her.

She took him up in an almost hard business tone and manner.

'That was over three years ago ; and when, after many months of search by all the ordinary methods known to them, M. Michaud and his other employés absolutely failed to find the stolen will (the first necessary step), he sent for me in despair, told me the whole case, and placed it unreservedly in my hands ; in less than three months I placed the document in his hands.'

‘It was you, then, who found it!—you, a girl of sixteen, who outwitted a clever woman like the Marquise?’

‘Yes; she was clever enough to know that she had only to depart from the beaten track in order to baffle the police. I had always followed a very simple and totally different method to theirs — one which, in my place, you would follow yourself, I am sure. I have always studied my case and the character of my antagonist before I stir a step.’

‘Ah, so! I thought so,’ said Albyn. ‘One can then exactly put one’s-self into the mental and physical position of such antagonists, and see precisely what they have done or will do. Would you mind telling me in detail how you worked out this—problem, shall I call it?’

‘If you care to hear it.’

She told him quietly, concisely, with a keen sense of the comedy of the whole

thing—the more entire from the instinctive *rapproch*, the sympathy she felt to exist between herself and her listeners ; and both laughed right out when she came to poor M. Michaud's crestfallen admission of his own inferiority of system to hers.

‘As to Madame D'Amville,’ added the actress, ‘she has not a notion, a suspicion, who or what I am besides artiste ; still less that I took the will in her minute's absence for the cards. M. Michaud thinks I am a witch,’ shrugging her shoulders, ‘and can do anything but—’

‘Faith, so do I !’ said Albyn impetuously ; then, instantly checking himself, added, ‘but forgive me ; I am taking up your time. Please go on from that point.’

‘Well, then,’ said the agent, ‘you know how the Marquise was banished quietly. Michaud then sent another agent

named Golbout to Italy, as you know, and on his failure to trace the Padre Anselmo (beyond his being a Roman), I was sent, on my leaving the Clairon. I could not do much more, however, and returned to Paris, and went to different engagements at various theatres. You know from M. Michaud how, at last, we learned that Anna Ferrara had fled with an Englishman, and it was thus, when by general consent and co-opinions of you, the employer, and me, the employed, the case was transferred to England. I was still sent with it to follow it, M. Michaud passing the affair over to his brother-in-law, Mr Emerton. All this you knew, I think ?

‘All, but that you were the moving spirit of it all, La Mara,’ he said, with a flash in his dark eyes that made hers droop, and the slender hands that lay locked on her lap moved restlessly, as she said,—

‘It is far, far too much, Mr Castleton, to say that, and the very point about which my chief now directs me to put myself in direct communication with you, is because he thinks that you may be able to give efficient aid in that point reached—’

‘By you, not him,’ interrupted Albyn.

‘By me, but not by any witchlike arts or cleverness,’ she said, smiling slightly; ‘but by the vaguest possible flash of suspicion of possibility, springing or evolved out of what you told me the other night of the story of William Dysart.’

Castleton started sharply; the name seemed to come so oddly across him again that day after his brother’s letter.

‘Then you think,’ he said, at last, ‘that William Dysart was possibly the English lover with whom Anna fled?’

‘Yes, possibly, but before I can feel or have a more decided opinion about it, I must learn more about him.’

‘That, of course,’ answered Castleton gravely; ‘the dates of his flight, of the *on dit* here of some escapade of his, and of his return home, and death, certainly tally singularly. What else strikes you?’

She looked up quickly, keenly, and said,—

‘The same as, I fancy, strikes you at this moment in his whole story; but I will give you the exact data I gave to Mr Emerton, and then we shall be on clear and equal ground.’ He bowed, and Margherita, speaking in exactly the matter of course business manner she used to the inspector, repeated precisely all she had said to him.

When the soft voice ceased, Albyn said,—

‘I thoroughly agree with you on every point, and with you I am very much afraid that there has been no marriage that would, at any rate, stand the test of an

adverse law suit, if even we find Anna or a child of hers. William Dysart was an even dissolute man, I believe, from all I have heard ; but still I was a mere lad at the time he died, and knew little of him personally ; but my brother, Rex, knew him well—knew the Dysart family, and, rather oddly, in a letter I got this very day there was an expression used speaking of him, which rather goes with what you said ; and I had often so thought of his photo. Rex says, “what a pity he (Will Dysart) was such a scapegrace, for he had some good in him, and I always thought it a shame that Amabel Carruthers threw him over.” Now, my brother comes to town next week, Margherita,—ah, pardon me !—it comes so naturally somehow when we are alone that—’

‘It matters nothing,’ she said, quietly ;
‘call me so if you like ; go on please.’

‘Well, it will be easy for me to get

from Rex much more intimate knowledge of William Dysart's real character, and perhaps more intimate circumstances of his death, and as Mrs Carruthers is in town—'

'She will hardly be in the Bohemia in which I move,' said the actress, looking up full in his face, 'yet I should very much like to meet her, and by degrees get from her what it was that Mr Dysart said in his letter.'

'I think you can manage it through your admirer, little Kate Bury-Talmer.'

'I will think of that, or some way,' said the agent, with a half-amused smile; 'perhaps I shall set you to flirt with her, and—'

'I cry your mercy, Margherita! don't ask me to flirt with a staid, prudish country dame of forty! my dear girl.'

'Well, she will be the more easily fooled by a young fellow,' said the actress.

‘ But, child, those sort of people think it awful for a married woman to flirt ; I should have her at the first soft speech draw up with a “ Sir ! ” and have M. le Mari ask me what I mean. Oh, not to be thought of, La Mara, you will have to manage the country dame ! ’

The girl laughed.

‘ We can do without her, perhaps. We must find out the doctor who attended Mr Dysart—where he had been abroad (if possible) the last two years of his life, and so on. I shall also keep as close a watch as possible on Lady Caroline and the marquise, for their interest is really one, I believe, if they only find it out.’

‘ Ay—if—if Anna was his wife, and is alive, or has left a legitimate child,’ said Castleton ; ‘ but I believe that you are right—whatever he really did do, Lady Caroline knows it, and from himself. Is

that all the aid I can give you then, Margherita ?’

‘About your brother?—yes, at present, thank you, Mr Castleton, but with your permission I will enlist you further if I need your help.’

‘To serve you is happiness, you know,’ he said, as she rose.

‘Ah, monsieur,’ said the actress, half lightly, half bitterly, ‘keep such pretty speeches for the *Trois-Etoiles*, or the *salon*, or the green-room ; here I am your agent, I serve you, not you me. Enough, I am going.’

She resumed cap and veil, and turned, but Castleton stepped forward quickly.

‘I have a hansom at the door, let me drive you to wherever you desire to be put down. No one can possibly recognise the diva.’

She heard that—and paused. Ah, it was such wild, dangerous happiness to be

near him—with him! Why should she care—she—society's outcast? she yielded and gave him her hand—she felt his close on it as he stooped—felt his warm lips upon it, and then she was out in the air, at his side in the hansom, and it dashed off.

Neither spoke at first—perhaps each heart unknown to the other was too wildly turbulent to trust itself. Then, it was Albyn who first spoke.

‘Had Addison told you that there is not a booked place in the theatre left for Saturday's *matinée*; more, he has turned money away.’

‘Yes,’ answered the actress, almost gloomily. ‘I hope you will not all be too bitterly disappointed in what you called at the rehearsal “the first real Italian Juliet.”’

‘You are assuming, as a matter of course, that there must be some, nay much, disappointment, Margherita.’



‘There must be, where so much more is looked for than I can dare hope to fulfil,’ said the girl; ‘you and Addison would put it on; would make me play Juliet; and if I fail!’

‘Your genius cannot—will not,’ Castleton interrupted, impetuously. ‘You will do what I said—score another triumph, and we shall have to run it alternate nights with *L’Une et l’Autre*. Besides,’ he added, after a moment’s pause, and veiling the bold words under a lighter tone, ‘since I have staked my best judgment upon you in this, you must succeed, for my sake.’

For his sake! The one watchword of her careless, outcast life, since that dreary night in the snow; the golden writing on her heart, that had saved her hitherto from utter recklessness; that heart, whose heavy, startled throbs now almost stifled her, for a moment. Then she could an-

swer lightly, in her pretty, half-saucy way,—

‘After that, of course, anything short of a perfect Juliet would be impossible, and I shall be afraid to be at the Academy opening day only the Monday after—I should be mobbed.’

‘Faith you will be that anyhow, my dear child,’ said Castleton, laughing; ‘may I not escort you?’

‘You must ask Kate, Mrs Bury-Talmer, that question; I am going with her.’

‘I shall ask her on Saturday, at the theatre,’ he said; ‘of course she will be there. Where shall I set you down, Margherita?’

‘Anywhere before we get to Grafton Street.’

They were nearly there by this time; and in a few more minutes Albyn stopped the cab in a by-street, dismissed the delighted Jehu with nearly



double the fare he asked, and bade adieu to the actress. He was perhaps scarcely conscious how close and lingering was the clasp of his hand; and then she went swiftly away towards Grafton Street. He moved slowly in the direction of his own house, the touch of that soft hand still in his, the glance of those dark, Italian eyes still before him; the eyes that, as a child, had looked at him long ago, while the passionate lips declared, 'I shall never forget you!—never, never!' Had she still kept to that? His—yes; his own Blackbird. Ah me! ah me!





CHAPTER VIII.

A SATURDAY AFTERNOON AND EVENING.

ONE might as well expect the waving corn that whispered King Midas' secret to the air to cease from waving to and fro, as hope for a moment that such a scene as had passed at the Polyglot could be enacted before a score of idle young fellows, without a whisper of it getting abroad—for a pack of idle men are every bit as gossipy and as scandal-mongering as a pack of idle women—as Castleton very well knew, and when he met Margherita he felt certain that she must have heard something, pro-

bably exactly what had passed. This was in fact the truth, for the day before Tom Tillotson had met Addison, who asked him, what was this he heard about a passage of arms between Albyn Castleton and some one who had insulted La Mara. Tom told him the whole story, and in the evening, at the theatre, Addison told it to the actress herself, thinking she had better (as of course she had heard part) know the whole, and on exactly what ground she stood.

‘Thanks,’ she had answered, quietly; ‘it was just like Castleton, and—just like Pierrepont; but one must not blame him either, an actress is fair game for all shafts. I am used to it all.’

And then the call-boy came, and she had to go on the stage.

The announcement of ‘Romeo and Juliet,’ with a Juliet whose exquisite beauty could not fail to look the part, however her

youth might make her fall short of perfection in acting, had attracted a fashionable and large audience to the Saturday *matinée*, and the spacious theatre was filled from stalls to gallery.

‘She will dress splendidly, of course,’ said Helen Dysart, with a sneer. ‘Cream satin and jewels to match, but the acting’—

But Helen’s jealous spite was doomed to utter disappointment. How should she understand the inspiration of genius, or charm of those words ‘for my sake.’

The rich dress and noble Italian beauty of the young actress were unquestionably powerful aids ; but still they were aids, not the acting itself, the genius which made her impersonation of the impassioned ill-fated Juliet a glorious triumph, in which some slight points, which time and experience would obliterate, were only perceived by a few refined and severe critics, such as Castleton, Redfern, and one or two others.

The two men who had, as Albyn said, staked their reputation on their Juliet, were richly justified in their judgment and confidence in her, and Louis Wayland's Romeo was so fine, that she was well supported. He declared she inspired him, and with truth, no doubt. But all the homage of the *elite* audience, all the congratulations of those privileged ones who gathered after it in the green-room, were nothing to the look in one pair of deep dark eyes, as their owner bent down, nothing to his soft whisper—'Thank you—you have even passed my boldest hopes.'

Then, as M. Eustache at last made a move, Castleton added—

'Little Kate gives her leave for Monday, so I shall come, remember. And at the Academy I can introduce you to my brother and his wife; you saw me with them in the first act to-day, after I left Butterfly's box.'

‘Your sister would not thank you,’ said La Mara, with a haughty, bitter little laugh, ‘for introducing to her the diva of the Trois-Etoiles ; please do not do it.’

Albyn set his teeth ; but as they reached the stage door, he said,—

‘I will not promise,’ and at once handed her into the carriage in which Eustache and Madame waited her.

‘See you in to-night, I suppose, mon ami ?’ said Eustache significantly ; but the other answered,—

‘I don’t know ; I’m engaged to dine at my brother’s ; good-bye,’ and he bowed low to the ladies, and turned away as the carriage swept off.

The dinner was quite *en famille*, though a few friends were to drop in afterwards.

‘I told Albyn to come in before regulation time, too, my dear,’ said the squire, a fine handsome man of five-and-forty, as genial and big-hearted as he was tall

and broad shouldered; 'so he ought to be here soon.'

This as Mrs Castleton came into the drawing-room—she was a pretty, elegant woman of seven or eight-and-thirty, very fond of her husband, and attached to her captivating, rackety brother, though in a continual state of horror at his 'terrible wildness,' and anxiety to get him married and settled respectably down before her own two sons (lads of ten and twelve) should be old enough to follow his dreadful example.

'He won't be long, I daresay,' said Mrs Castleton; 'unless he did not go straight home from the theatre. He went away back to behind the scenes long before the end.'

'Behind the scenes!' A mysterious region of unutterable horrors and dreadful things to the speaker. She added,—

'He seemed to know half the fast-

looking ladies in the theatre, without counting the actresses behind the scenes.'

What an exaggeration! He had just been seen in the stalls talking to the dashing Marquise D'Amville and another lady, who was reputed to be the best (female) whip and judge of horse-flesh then in town; then, of course, in Kate Bury-Talmer's box doing a flirtation; later on, in Addison's box chatting with *charmante* Madame Eustache.

'That is saying too much, my love,' said the squire; 'but still I am afraid he leads as fast a life as ever. I wish he would settle down.'

'So do I, most heartily,' answered Mrs Castleton; 'for it keeps me in constant terror that he may end by marrying some one quite beneath him.'

'Not he, Constance! Albyn is proud as Lucifer, and I have no fear of that at all.'



‘Proud enough! Yes, and quite right; but,’ said Constance truly enough, ‘some of those sort of people are artful to a degree, and that foreign actress is wonderfully beautiful. One cannot trust the best of you men when a clever, unscrupulous woman is minded to twist you round her finger.’

‘Ha! ha! ha!’ laughed the good-natured squire. ‘You had better tell Albyn that, Connie, and suggest a suitable wife to him.’

‘I certainly shall,’ answered the lady; ‘and I think you might speak to him very seriously about—’

‘Thank you for nothing, my love,’ interposed Reginald, with grim dryness. ‘Albyn is a man of thirty, and the finest-tempered fellow in the world; but that would be testing him a little too far. Besides, what do we really know of his life? I don’t believe he is a bit worse than others.’

‘Oh, you men!’ said Mrs Castleton, giving her delicate embroidery silk a pull that snapped it short off. ‘He had better marry Helen Dysart, and settle down. I have asked her and her mother this evening, and—’

‘My dear, if you try to matchmake for that erratic, wilful brother of mine, I am afraid you will find him kick the traces quite over.’

‘I’ll tell you what it is, Rex, you have all spoiled that boy from the cradle.’

‘Well then, my dear,’ returned Rex composedly, ‘I don’t think on the whole that he is a very bad specimen of spoiling, if it were only proved by one thing,’ added the elder brother, his fine open face beaming, with a tender light in the blue eyes. ‘You know that I was thirty before I ever saw your pretty face, dear, and that both I myself and everybody else thought me settled down into a confirmed bachelor, and

for years I always considered Albyn as the heir to Monks-Royal ; and yet, when out riding one day, I told him I was going to be married, he spun his cap fifty yards into the air, and declared it was the jolliest news he had heard yet ; and then, when the boys were born, how glad he was ; and what a fuss he makes with them when he's been with us. He is as generous, unselfish a being as ever breathed, with all his faults and sporting.'

'My dear husband, nobody knows that better than I do ; but it is just because we are so fond of him that we wish to see him more steady ; perhaps—'

'Hush !' said the squire quickly ; 'that is his voice below.'

And his light, springy step outside, his bright presence within, the next moment, a close handclasp for his brother, a tender kiss for the wife.

'Too soon for *les convenances*, sweet

sister mine, isn't it? But I took you at your word.'

'Quite right, dear,' Constance answered, throwing back the rich curly locks from his brow, as he dropped into the footstool at her feet. 'You know you are never *de trop*.'

'Thanks. You certainly do make me altogether too impudently confident of a welcome, you people,' said he, looking up; 'what did you think of "Romeo and Juliet?" I didn't see you again after the play, because I had to do the pretty to the company, you see.'

'Think of it,' said his brother, 'why there can be but one opinion about the whole performance. I don't know when we have had such a treat.'

Albyn's bright eyes sparkled like diamonds.

'I'll tell them that; we are going to run it alternately with "L'Une et l'Autre."

You must see that too. I'll send you a box order for any night you like.'

'Thanks ; not for Monday then, Albyn, as we shall be tired with the Academy.'

'Tired !' Albyn, seasoned racket that he was, opened his eyes wide, then laughed. 'Oh, of course you will go. You two are going quite *à la* Darby and Joan, I suppose?'

Mrs Castleton seized her opportunity, and rushed gallantly in, with truly feminine moral courage.

'It is a great pity, you naughty boy, that you don't take unto you a wife, and settle down into a respectable member of society.'

'Oh ho,' said he, with a keen, wickedly comprehensive look from one to the other. 'That's it, is it, Mrs Constance ? What dreadful sins have I committed to deserve such a fate ? Settle down, indeed ! Come home to tea, and find domestic felicity the sum of happiness, instead of—faith ! not I,

Connie, the picture is too awful, and quite out of my line. Not in the nature of the varmint, my dear.'

He looked so wickedly handsome, so ludicrously opposed to the burlesque picture he drew, that Rex laughed out,—

'I must say you look far more like flirting with your friends' wives to—

'Providing one of my own for my friends to flirt with,' put in Albyn, with his saucy glance up to Constance. 'Who is the lady selected, Connie, to play Beatrice to my Benedict?'

'You will turn all I say into such ridicule,' said she, vexed, yet obliged to laugh, 'that it is useless my suggesting any one.'

'By all the fair goddesses of Olympus, and by Mrs Venus in particular, I vow it is not. Out with it, Connie, or I shall appeal to Rex. I know there is some one in particular.'

‘You had better guess,’ said the squire.

‘I will. Was it Madame la Marquise D’Amville, *née* Montmorenci, or — ah! perhaps, dashing Lady Harriet Welsdon? — (“Harry” we call her)—only it happens that her much better half is still alive.’

‘Don’t be so tiresome, Albyn. And I don’t want to know your fast nicknames for people.’

‘Poor Lady Harry! I’ll introduce her to you,’ said Albyn. ‘She would certainly save me immense trouble by looking after the grooms and horses. I’ll think about her, whenever she divorces old Welsdon for not knowing a racer from a hunter.’

‘Will you cease your nonsense, Albyn, and listen to me. You might have your choice, and not get a refusal, I am sure. There is that lovely girl, Helen Dysart, now.’

‘Oh, Constance, you dear, transparent sister!’ cried out Albyn, laying his curly head back on her lap, to laugh heartily; ‘the cat’s out, head, tail, and body. I knew you two had been talking over my delinquencies the moment I came in, and that it was Helen you were driving at.’

‘Well, you have nothing against her, I suppose,’ said Constance, pluckily holding to her colours.

‘Oh, no, nothing, though she is not all my fancy painted, I confess. I suppose you have asked her and Lady Caroline this evening; but, you know, Connie, I haven’t a chance against her adorer Charlton Pierrepont, who has only one feeble, little baby-boy life between him and a wealthy baronetcy.’

‘Nonsense, Albyn; you are well off, even with all your extravagance; and what girl would look at M. Pierrepont if you choose to enter the lists?’



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‘ Ah, if I do ! ’ muttered the rebel, pulling his silky moustache ; but the thought flashed across him that it might perhaps be advisable, to a certain extent, to make a blind of Helen ; at any rate, not avow a too open and decided determination against the suggestion made ; so aloud he said, ‘ My dear sister, your kind affection makes you too partial and flattering ; and as for that match-making Lady Caroline— ’

‘ My dear boy, ’ put in Rex, ‘ one knows that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush ; and Albyn Castleton, actual owner of his mother’s property, is better than Charlton Pierrepont, heir *very* presumptive to title and wealth. You were flirting with her to-day. ’

‘ Of course—

“ I flirt with many,—

Too worldly wise to wed myself to any,” ’

laughed Albyn carelessly ; ‘ but still, to

please you, I'll be very civil to Helen to-night,—will that do? I told Mr Addison the other day that I thanked Heaven I was a younger son, and you for saving me from the heirship of Monk's Royal—fact!' said he, springing up as the door opened and dinner was announced. And then he took Constance down to dinner, and during, at least half of that meal kept them in open, and the servant who waited, in agonies of suppressed merriment by his wit and gay rattle, his anecdotes and fun. After Mrs Castleton had retired, however, he led his brother, with easy skill, to talk of the Dysarts, especially of William Dysart, all information about whom he stored for Emerton, or rather his young agent.

He certainly flirted with Miss Dysart that evening rather more than usual, though so deftly did he divide his homage between her and the two or three other

young unmarried guests, that neither Helen herself nor her mother could fairly have construed his gay devoirs into paying attention, though both would fain have done so. He had not the least idea of trifling, or that he might possibly practically trifle with the girl's affections seriously, for vanity was not one of his faults ; and if anyone had suggested to him that Helen might be in love with him, he would have replied that she was a beauty, a belle, but he did not believe that she had much heart to give, or be trifled with. Perhaps in this he was not far from the truth, but whatever she had was certainly given to his handsome, winning self. Poor Helen ! if that evening she triumphantly flattered herself that she had made an impression on him, she was doomed to disappointment on the Monday following.



CHAPTER IX.

OPENING DAY.

OPENING day at the Royal Academy! What a merciless crush it is! Everybody goes, of course—to see everybody else, and be seen of everybody. Nobody sees much of the pictures, or makes much pretence of doing so; and, *entre nous*, generally speaking, it is not a great loss to them either. The Academy rooms are for that day a glass of fashion, a gathering of the living celebrities; and if they are seen, the visitors have gained their end.

‘What exquisite toilettes one does see here,’ remarked one lady to another, pausing to look around her; ‘and I have recognised already several faces I saw at the Parthenon on Saturday. Did you see its advertisement this morning, Mrs Hayter?’

‘No,’ replied the lady, looking after Lady Caroline and Helen Dysart, who were passing; ‘what is it about?’

‘Oh! “Romeo and Juliet,” of course, as one might expect after such a success; it is to be played alternately with “L’Une et l’Autre,” beginning to-morrow night. Of course the rising actress of the day, La Mara, will be here soon. I wonder what she will wear?’

‘And who she will be with?’ added Mrs Hayter, with a little laugh. ‘They say she is quite Bohemian.’

‘Oh! of course, but that is nothing,’ rejoined the other lady. ‘A girl, especi-

ally an actress, need not be necessarily any the worse for that in these days. And there she is, I verily believe! Everybody is turning—yes, with a lady and *such* a handsome man! Who is he, I wonder? I saw him, too, on Saturday.'

'Ah!'—Mrs Hayter was still staring through her eye-glass with the exquisite *politesse* so remarkable in the English public—'then I expect—my husband says he has heard that the Parthenon is really owned by a gentleman of family and fortune, and I shouldn't wonder if that is he; he has very good taste certainly'—with another little laugh—'and did you ever see such a perfect toilette as she has? That rich, deep crimson velvet and old gold, and the cavalier hat to match, are simply the most matchless set off to her dark beauty.'

'Yes,' said her friend; 'and I never before saw anyone, on the stage or off it,

so, at anyrate apparently, absolutely unconscious of her own beauty.'

A true enough compliment to Margherita. Vanity was not one of her faults, though she could scarcely have been blamed if it had been, since, even in her childhood, as little fairy queen in the pantomime, manager and audience alike had singled her out for her unique beauty. Then she had firmly believed she was the ugly 'little black devil' the miscreante she was with called her, and even young Castleton's flat contradiction of that had not shaken her long implanted idea, except as far as the fact that he thought differently, because he was so good. Poor little thing! she had long, long since known that he had been right. Had he not whispered the same to her even to-day, as he handed her after Kate into the carriage?'

'What inspiration made you choose that perfect dress?'

Well might every head turn and eye follow them, as leaning lightly on handsome Albyn Castleton's arm, with pretty Mrs Bury-Talmer on her left, they moved slowly forward, constantly exchanging salutes with first one, then the other till, before they had progressed far, a dashing woman, of perhaps thirty-six or seven, accosted them,—

‘Got you at last!’ she began, breathlessly, as she shook hands with them; ‘there’s such a crowd, and you are so surrounded. What it is to be a famous actress, you see.’

‘Hardly that yet, Lady Harry,’ said Margherita, smiling.

‘My dear girl, nonsense! You were running the race at a canter before, but you have passed the winning post with “Juliet”—hasn’t she, Castleton?’

Albyn bowed.

‘It is no new compliment for me to

say Yes to that, Lady Harry; are you alone here?’

‘Oh! no; Mr Welsden said he was coming, so I drove him down in my phaeton with Pierrepont, but he joined the Dysarts, of course, and I sighted you people. Shall you be at the Derby, by the way, Castleton?’

‘Not,’ said Albyn, glancing at his two fair companions, ‘unless in attendance on one or both of these ladies, for the sake of a good ride.’

‘Not I, thanks,’ said Mrs Bury-Talmer at once; ‘I’ve been enough times. Racing is a bore, I think, so does La Mara.’

‘I suppose I mustn’t say amen to that too, in Harry Welsden’s presence,’ added Albyn.

‘Oh, I can’t make you out,’ said her ladyship, with something between vexation and puzzled amusement. ‘You don’t race, you only bet occasionally, if fellows bother

you, and yet you play—play high and recklessly, though I can't make out that you care particularly about it.'

'Only when bright eyes are near,' said he, with a glance and laugh that might have pointed a pretty compliment alike to one or all of the three ladies with him.

'Ah, you have always a flowery speech ready to trip off your tongue,' laughed Lady Harriet Welsden; 'there is Captain Calvert and—yes—Tom Tillotson coming this way.' Which they accomplished with some difficulty.

'It's no joke to get at one's friends,' said Calvert, as greetings passed. 'My dear Mrs Bury-Talmer, honour me,' putting Kate's hand on his arm; 'it is quite impossible for any fellow to escort properly more than one lady in this crush, and so Castleton must give you up to my charge for a while.'

'You're cool, certainly, M. le Capitaine,'



laughed Albyn ; ‘ but, I suppose, we shall meet from time to time before luncheon-time, and, meanwhile we, at any rate, will get some idea of the pictures ; shall we, diva Margherita ? ’

‘ I should like to do so, since we are supposed to be here with that intention,’ said the actress, smiling, and perfectly aware that he wished to get her away from the rest, for a time at least. ‘ I see one over there which looks as if it would bear close inspection, so ta-ta, for the present, Kate, but though we shall meet in a crowd, I do not think you will shun me—’

‘ Who would ? ’ whispered Castleton, as he drew her onward into the crowd.

‘ A good many people,’ said the girl, with sudden bitterness ; ‘ your own brother and his wife, perhaps.’

Castleton knew well that she was thinking of the late episode at the Polyglot, and at once boldly touched the wound to heal.

‘Pardon me,’ he said, low and gently, ‘if I say I read your thoughts ; but in hearing one part of that story, they, like others, must have heard all ; I will take care they do ; and, if my sister Constance has her position, you have at least an assured professional position. I wish I could see them to introduce you, they must be in the Academy somewhere by this time.’

‘It is like looking for a needle in a bottle of hay,’ said the actress ; ‘one might be here the whole day, and never meet one’s best friend ; but we shall have to find Kate again.’

‘Not just yet,’ answered Castleton, in Italian, ‘for I want to tell you what I learned from my brother Rex ; of the value you will be the judge, for your experience is practical, mine only theoretical, and I do not think a crowd is at all a bad place for a secret, if no names are mentioned, and a foreign language used.’

The detective's agent smiled.

'It is better sometimes than between four walls, for they may have ears sometimes, but in the hum and noise of a pre-occupied crowd individual sound is lost or unnoticed.'

'Exactly,' answered Castleton; 'well, I got my brother to myself after dinner on Saturday, and by asking carelessly if he had yet met Mrs Carruthers, easily led the conversation back to his younger days and companions. The result is favourable to your supposition, the original of that photograph was a man with some good in him, but still practically little removed from something very like a *roué*, certainly quite capable of using every persuasion, or even deception, to gain such an end as we suppose, if once he were bent upon it.'

'Capable even,' said the girl, 'of a false marriage, and, of course, desertion when he was tired of his toy?'

‘I am afraid so, child; my brother says that his own suspicions of that last trip to the Continent was that he went off to escape getting publicly mixed up in a threatened divorce story in which he was pretty sure that he was entangled, and which he feared would get to the ears even of his country *fiancée*. He was not therefore likely to be a very scrupulous man if he fell in love with a girl, who was not to be entrapped by very easy means.’

‘And not, therefore,’ said his listener, ‘very likely to have legally married poor Anna. It is not a very hopeful look-out for our search, Mr Castleton, though the point in the story which strikes me as somewhat unaccountable is that William should, when ill, write to break off his engagement himself, which was before he was given up, was it not?’

‘Yes; but after he was pronounced in danger, my brother believed it might have

been, probably was, due to his sister-in-law's artful influence working on remorse.'

'Of that I have not the least doubt,' said Emerton's agent, with her soft, cynical little laugh. 'He believed in her, did he not?'

'Yes, quite.' Albyn's smile and shrug of his shoulders was as significant as her laugh. 'And as some rumour of some escapade had reached England before his return, she of course used that, I don't doubt, to draw from him some confessions; or, as we suggested the other evening, he let out his secret in delirium, enough at least for her purpose.'

'Had he,' asked Margherita, 'been in love with his *fiancée*? did he wish for the marriage, or was it a family arrangement?'

'Both. My brother thought the mother very much wished him to settle down and reform—the lady was young,

very pretty, and well dowered, and her family knew nothing of what he was.'

'And he liked her then,—or at anyrate the marriage, up to the time he went abroad?'

'He so expressed himself to my brother shortly before he left England.'

'Where was he when telegraphed for to his mother's death-bed?'

'Well, Rex said that he understood they had sent only to the Poste-restante, Geneva, the only address they had, but where he actually was, no one knew; and when he returned, his mother's death and funeral, and his own fatal fever followed so immediately, that as far as my brother knows or remembers, he never expressed any wishes about his own engagement. It is vexing to miss that point.'

'Very vexing,' the girl answered, gazing with apparent interest on a charming study of Leighton's.

‘But I may perhaps get that and other information out of the doctor who attended him. Can you tell me who it was? did your brother know?’

‘Yes; it was not the regular doctor at Monk’s Hill (you know that all this occurred at William’s mother’s house, at a village a few miles from our place, near Monk’s Hill), for he was absent for a holiday, and a young London doctor named Halcombe was taking his practice, but he subsequently settled, I understand, in Brighton.’

‘Where I hope he is still,’ said the actress, ‘for either my chief or I must pay him a visit if he is still alive; the lapse of time you see is our great difficulty, all through this search.’

‘I know it, but I will still hope for your success, however long it may be in coming.’

‘And if never?’ she said, glancing up.

‘I do not choose to contemplate defeat,’ said he, with his sunny smile, as he met her eyes for a moment. ‘Ah, by all that is lucky! I see Rex and Constance.’

A few steps and he touched the squire’s broad shoulder.

‘Who!—my dear boy?’ exclaimed the elder brother; ‘we have been looking for you.’

‘And I for you,’ said Albyn. ‘Allow me—though it is a mere formality, Mademoiselle La Mara—Mr and Mrs Castleton.’

However little pleased Mrs Castleton really was to find herself bowing on equal terms so far to the beautiful diva of Bohemia, however still less pleased were both she and her husband to see the young actress in public with their brother, and alone too, apparently, both were too high bred to show the faintest shadow of such a feeling; indeed the hearty, genial squire would have found it a very hard task to be

anything but cordial to a girl so young and exquisitely beautiful, so gracefully fascinating as this Italian, and if there was a touch of dignified distance in Mrs Castleton's manner, it came only naturally from her own matronly dignity and position to one so young, and a stranger to her.

'I do not know,' she said, 'when we have been so entirely charmed as we were on Saturday afternoon, not only by your "Juliet," but by the support you had from your fellow artistes. I think we, the public, are infinitely indebted to my brother and Mr Addison for getting together such a company as the Parthenon presented to us.'

'My dear Constance, give Addison all the credit,' said Albyn laughingly. 'I hadn't much to do with it.'

'Oh, nonsense, Albyn, don't be modest,' put in Rex Castleton, 'or else a humbug, which is worse—don't you think so, Mademoiselle?'

She laughed a little wickedly, and shrugged her shoulders.

‘I think not, Mr Castleton—it is in the air one breathes—this humbug, it makes half the wheels on which the world moves.’

‘It certainly oils them, at any rate,’ added Albyn—then glancing over the throng; ‘but just at present I want to catch sight again of my other fair charge, Mrs Bury-Talmer, who is with us, only Calvert took her to look at some particular picture; shall we journey towards the refreshment-room? perhaps she may be there; I want to introduce her to you.’

‘Go where you like, my dear boy; is this lady Professor Bury-Talmer’s wife?’

‘Yes,’ answered Albyn, giving Margherita the most wicked covert look of mischief in the world. Constance would of course expect to meet a staid, respectable personage, a good foil to these two rackety

people beside her, and he took good care not to speak of her as 'little Kate' or 'Butterfly,' and when they did meet, and were all taking coffee and sandwiches at the same table, little quick, wicked Kate, much to Albyn's and the actress's secret amusement, took equally good care to add to his name the 'Mr,' which she generally dropped, and spoke of her husband the 'dear professor,' telling them, in her lively way, of his good-natured endurance of their teasing him about his specimens. 'Of which, you know, Mrs Castleton, I am the best he has got, and I tell him I don't mind any of his, except reptiles; if he brings that into the house, I shall have to run away positively. He tried to coax La Mara into his horrid sanctum the other day to see his specimens.'

'He got her as far as the door, my dear Connie,' said Albyn, laughing at the recollection, 'and then she came flying

back to us in the drawing-room, as if his satanic majesty was after her.'

'I am afraid I should do much the same thing, Mademoiselle,' said the elder lady, 'for I cannot bear insects.'

'Insects!' exclaimed Mrs Bury-Talmer. 'My dear Mrs Castleton, I wish that were all. I should be sorry to say what horrid things he has got there. Margherita, do you know, he is positively coming with me to see "Romeo and Juliet" to-morrow night?'

'Really; we are honoured indeed, then!'

said the actress. 'How did you persuade him?'

'He wanted to see you in it, my dear; you are quite a favourite of his.'

'By simple force of contrast, then, am I so honoured?' said the actress, laughing. 'But I suppose I may admit that the sentiment is reciprocal.'

'Oh! yes, my dear, I shall not be

jealous,' returned Butterfly, as they now began to move back towards the picture rooms again. 'What time must you leave so as to dine and get down to the theatre?'

'Not much later than four, Kate; but I need not curtail any one's time, because I shall just slip off round to Grafton Street.'

'Indeed, you won't then, for you and Mr Albyn Castleton will just come back with me to dinner. I told Wayland and Mrs Kavanagh to join us for five o'clock sharp.'

'That admits of no negatives at all,' said the squire merrily. 'What tyrants these women are—aren't they, Albyn?'

'So; but you men like the tyranny,' retorted the actress archly; 'so we are quits.'

'I don't object to the tyranny of the fair,' said Albyn, putting her hand on his arm again, as passing out of the refresh-

ment-room he caught sight of Lady Caroline and her daughter not far off, near enough to exchange bows indeed. 'Are you going that way, Rex? Very well. Ah! there is that picture of Poynter's.' He touched Kate, and while the three paused before the picture, his brother and sister moved on, nor did they in that crowd chance to meet again until near four, when they were about leaving, and then only at bowing—not speaking distance. Albyn would have given much to know his sister's impressions of La Mara, and he was determined to find out—an easy task for him. He would not ask himself why he was so anxious that that impression should be a favourable one, despite Constance thinking her much too Bohemian for her taste, and her displeasure at seeing her with himself, especially as both the Dysarts and Pierre-point had seen them, as he had intended.

It was the best refutation of the latter's cruel slander, and the girl herself felt that.

Too reckless, perhaps, of inevitable *on dits* in general, the knowledge of her own heart made her bitterly sensitive where this man she had loved all her young, dreary life were concerned, a life dreary even now, despite its excitement and glitter and homage. Yes! where were the sweet memories of childhood, when she had never had a childhood? Where the tender clingingness of fair girlhood, when girlhood had never been—only rich mental power, of necessity asserting its own force; proud, self-reliant, unguided by any moral influences or counterpoise to the dark and reckless side of life's stage, on which, from first to last, she had been thrown? Society's outcast now as then, with no softer light, no inner life but one that in itself was fraught with direst danger from itself, if it saved all

other from having temptation, without one star in the east of her horizon, but this deep, all-powerful human love, implanted, indeed, on a singularly innate purity of nature; rich in the gold of the poetry of its imagination and pathos, its high-souled beauty and self-sacrifice. But still—still the young, passionate heart is but human; and if that other's heart, as undisciplined, as passionate as her own, should turn against its nobler self and her, will there be strength to sweep back the dross from the gold?





CHAPTER X.

AT THE TROIS-ETOILES.

TO such a mind as that of Margherita La Mara, to have a certain point to gain, or end in view, was to at once scheme for the attainment of that end. The information just obtained for her by her employer, Castleton, as to the character and further details of William Dysart's story, all went to give still greater probability to the supposition on which she was now working, and that whatever the dead man's last delinquency had been, Lady Caroline was in possession of the truth

of it, and had used it to break off his engagement with Amabel Carruthers, in case of his recovery. At present she was in truth only working on an hypothesis and moving in the dark; but now light began to glimmer, the astute detective mind began to see its way to either make that hypothesis (the connection between Anna and this Dysart) into a fact, or show it to be an utterly false scent. The medical man, Dr Halcombe, very probably knew, or had heard, if only a name, in his patient's fevered wanderings, therefore Margherita had at once two things plainly before her, as the next step—to get at the two people who held all or part of the secret, and get it from them without their knowledge that it was wrung from them by herself. That part of the path now before her footsteps relating to Dr Halcombe was, to her, very easy; that relating to Lady Caroline was more



difficult, and, as the young detective at once felt, required the intervention of indirect agency, with her hand as wirepuller ; nor need she go further for that blind agency, she saw at once, than the very woman whose interest, as Margherita had said to Albyn, was one with Lady Caroline's, if she only knew it—Eveline, Marquise D'Amville. 'And, of course, she must know it,' said the wirepuller to herself, as she stood in one of little Kate's drawing-room windows after dinner, ready and waiting for Lucy Kavanagh to appear for the short drive down to the theatre.

'On what are your thoughts so intent, bella Margherita ?' said Castleton, at her shoulder, while Wayland stood chatting with Professor Bury-Talmer. She started slightly, she had not heard him approach, but the dark eyes met his for a second as she said, very low,—

‘Of what you have told me—of what I must do.’

‘I should very much like to know what that is—to follow out your working of the problem—if I may, and aid you too.’

‘Hush!’—she touched her lip, with a swift glance over her shoulder—‘you can aid me; come in to-night at the Trois-Etoiles, there will be a number of them there, high play, excitement, and so on, and I can easily manage to speak to you apart in the salon-de-jeu itself. Don’t fail.’

‘Fail! when you bid,’ he said, and stopped, biting his lip, then added; ‘that would be indeed scant thanks for all your trouble in this tedious business.’

‘Trouble,’ the girl said, deliberately; ‘but remember I am only your paid agent to do the “trouble,” that is all, Mr Castleton.’

He turned away with a sudden flash of

light in the dark eyes, and a passionate answer leaping to the close set lips it never passed,—

‘That is not all, and I will make you know it yet, Blackbird—my Blackbird.’

Ah me—poor heart, did she not then know it long since too well. She lost no time in putting the first wheel of her machinery in motion, for when she was ready to leave the theatre, she stepped into Addison’s private room, with a ‘May I, please?’ and wrote a note to Emerton, which would certainly not have much enlightened any one but those initiated.

‘The medical man was a Dr Halcombe, who subsequently took a practice in Brighton. Please at once send some one down to ascertain his address, or wherever else he may be, if still living. M.’

That was all. She addressed it to her

chief's own house, and took it with her to give to Albyn to post that night, or rather in the small hours as he went home, so that it would reach Inspector Emerton by the first post in the morning.

It was past eleven when she left the Parthenon and drove home, if so the house in Grafton Street could be called—had her supper in her own rooms, and then exchanged the costume she had worn at the Academy for a rich evening dress of pearl-grey satin with crimson trimmings and embroidery, and descended to the salons about twelve, just as Charlton Pierrepont, with uplifted dice box in his hand, had asked M. Eustache impatiently, 'if the diva was coming in at all?'

'Do you think she has eloped from the theatre, mon ami?' asked Eustache, laughing; the 'goddesses of Olympus do not shine on mortals too quickly. Ah, here she is! Ma chere, you are late.'



‘Eh, bien, but better late than never, I suppose,’ said the actress, whose entrance had caused a general sensation and movement. ‘Do not disturb your play on my account, gentlemen, or I shall vanish back to my Olympian heights.’

There were some score of men in the luxuriously-appointed rooms, mostly of course of the sort one might expect to find in the *habitués* of what was, in fact, a private gambling *salle* of a *recherhé* and expensively carried on kind, and where play was admittedly unchecked, both as to stakes and games. Men, of whom the best were fast and reckless fellows, and the worst were *roués* and gamesters. Breathing such an atmosphere—thrown amongst such men as these for years past, is it a wonder that this girl, even while hating, haughtily scorning the means by which she climbed, had grown latterly cynical, reckless of that world of which her experience was so



dark and painful—controlled, disciplined, indeed mentally, but morally, who or what had there ever been in her outcast life to teach her that lesson? Heaven only knows where or how she had picked up the broadest distinctions between right and wrong, or the commonest, most patent truths of the Catholic creed. Had that too come from the one pure stream that had hitherto saved her—the love—child and girl, for that one man who had been kind to her? It might be—it may be, that in creating these rare natures so instinctively high and noble, that through all adverse wind, something within still turns to the better path, as the flower to the sun. God keepeth witnesses to Himself on the earth.

Exchanging a passing salute with Castleton, who was playing, she moved on amongst these men, with the careless smile on the lips, though not in the eyes,



the careless word or jest as she paused, first at one table, then at another, declining to play herself.

‘No, thanks, my lord,’ she answered one lightly, ‘I think I have gambled enough for the present on the stage; I had need, as Redfern said of me, to be *au fait* at every game of chance, to act that stabbing scene properly.’

She alluded to the last scene but one in ‘*L’Une et l’Autre*,’ one which presented a grand gambling salon of the period, and when Violette, roused to momentary madness by the unmerited reproaches of her lover’s haughty wife, for whom she has just staked and lost his most treasured gift to herself, snatches a dagger from one of those by, and lifts it to stab her rival.

‘That is true enough,’ laughed my lord; ‘and by-the-bye, La Mara, Pierrepont said that some one told him that dagger

was no "property" weapon, but a real realistic dagger that might be dangerous.'

'Yes, so it might, if I had really to use it,' the actress answered, carelessly; 'but you see I don't get so far as stabbing the Duchesse. I fling away the dagger in a passion of wild remorse.'

'I think,' said Pierrepont, lounging up, 'that it is carrying realism needlessly far.'

Moving some steps from his side, as if to better see the player's hands, the Italian answered,—

'I thought that every one knew the story of that dagger by this time. It is a real dagger of the time—Louis XV.—which Danton chanced upon at a curio-dealer's when we were rehearsing the play for the Clairon. A good price he gave for it too. Well, the very last night we had at the Rue Trois-Etoiles, before we left Paris, Danton came in, played, of course, and finally lost the last francs he had with

him to me at écarté, as he dolefully admitted when I offered him his revenge. "N'importe, monsieur," said I at once ; "stake your Louis XV. dagger against what you have lost, and cry quits." He laughed, took the challenge—played and—lost again. The next morning he sent me the dagger. Voilà tout.'

She shrugged her shoulders and turned away, pausing again by the table at which Castleton and some others were playing, high enough she saw very soon, as she stood watching the game, with one hand resting on the back of Castleton's chair. His bright eyes glanced up into hers for a second, wondering what thought threw such a shadow there,—gave such a bitter curve to the chiselled lips, even while both smiled on him as she said, shaking her head,—

'The goddess of chance has been against you, I see.'

‘But she must surely change when Beauty’s daughter is at my side—no—lost again,’ he said, with a careless laugh as he tossed a note into the others beside his opponent. ‘Your luck still, Calvert.’

Captain Calvert’s cheek was flushed, his eyes glittering.

‘Double the stake,’ he said, eagerly; ‘take your revenge.’

‘With pleasure, my dear fellow, if you take a cheque to-morrow for further losses, for I don’t believe I’ve got double the stakes about me.’

The little hand on his chair was shifted to his shoulder for a moment as the actress leaned across the table and lightly struck the cards from Calvert’s hands as he was gathering them up for a fresh deal.

‘A bas mes rivaux,’ said she, with that pretty, imperative impudence which only a beautiful woman can wear grace-

fully ; ‘ the stupid cards get more attention than I do, and I want all yours just now, Mr Castleton, to make you admit I was right to-day, and you wrong, about the misprints in that old copy of Schiller.’

Albyn’s quick wits caught her intention at once, and he sprang up.

‘ Ah, pardon. Yes, I remember our argument ; and you declared you would show me the errors in your volume. I am, of course, at your feet, fair diva,—where is the book ? ’

‘ Oh, just in the back room there, on that photograph-table near the window.’

She took his arm and moved on, scarcely more than passingly noticed by the majority of the players, who, as she had calculated, were by this time too eager, some, perhaps, desperately intent on their winnings and losses to pay much attention to even the diva of the Trois-Etoiles, except Pierrepont, whose covert

glance, full of jealous fury, followed them and made it difficult for him to maintain the semblance of attention to that which to him was in truth of absorbing interest—gambling.

Somewhat apart from the card-table was the elegant little occasional table, at which the actress now seated herself, opening a veritable copy of Schiller in the original, which she had previously placed there.

‘You followed my lead to perfection,’ she said, looking up in his handsome face as he stood by her. ‘Of course, while we speak we are looking for the errors’—turning a page and pointing to the top as if indicating a word,—‘it is only acting off the stage as well as on it.’

‘Ay, and if ears are not near enough to hear; there are eyes to see,’ said Castleton, bending a little over the book. ‘What are your orders, Margherita?’

She turned a few more pages and there lay her letter to Emerton, which Albyn quickly slipped into his breast.

‘I see ; post that before three.’

‘Thanks ; it is to tell him to send and get me the doctor’s address, then, Saturday evening, I shall run down myself, disguised, and get whatever he knows or suspects from him. The aid I want from you is very simple, though very necessary.’

He asked, ‘What is that ?’ quickly ; but his hand touched hers as it lay on the open book, and her heart beat fast under that touch, little dreaming that every throb of his answered hers only too faithfully. It was a hard battle this girl of eighteen had to fight, cruelly hard.

She answered in the same steady, business-like manner, that instinct told her was her only safeguard, now that Emerton’s direction had thrown her into such close contact with her real employer.

‘Have you in your possession any letter or scrap in old M. Croumassier’s own handwriting? I want it.’

‘Certainly; several letters relating to this business. What, in the name of wonder, do you want that for, you witch?’

‘Not for witchcraft, monsieur,’ she said, with a slight smile, ‘but simply to write a letter from him to his Paris lawyer. You see, my move in this game now is to cause the Marquise to discover (by an accident, of course) that her friend, Lady Caroline, knows something of Anna Ferrara, which will assist her in her claims; and whatever Madame learns from Miladi, I can easily get out of her. Stoop a little lower over these pages, and I will tell you my plan of warfare.’

He obeyed, drawing the volume a trifle more towards him, and listened in silence, while she detailed the clever plan she had formed. Could he not have listened for

ever to the low, rich tones of that loved—ah, how loved, voice! Well for her that the long, heavy lashes veiled the look in the downcast eyes.

‘Your scheme is perfect,’ he said, as she paused; ‘but are you sure about the handwriting, Margherita—of your power of forging?’

She laughed.

‘Mon Dieu! yes. There is not a writing that I could not imitate, so that the writer himself would be deceived.’

She rose up as she spoke, closing the volume of Schiller; but Castleton arrested her as she moved.

‘One moment, Margherita. What thought was in your mind when you came to my side at that card-table?’

She started slightly, and a momentary flush tinged the dark, colourless cheek.

‘Why do you ask? What does it matter? It was a flash of bitterness, that is all.’

‘All! But won’t you tell me what that “all” is, Margherita?’

So soft, so resistless, so exactly the same Albyn who had won the childish heart long ages ago, that her lips quivered, as she said,—

‘It was only that it crossed me bitterly, what would your sister Constance,—your brother, say if they could see me to-night? she scarcely, I think, liked an actress being introduced to her, but this—the diva of the *Trois-Etoiles*.’

‘Child, hush! It maddens me to hear that; to see you here,’ he said, between his teeth.

‘What does it matter?’ she said, with almost fierce recklessness; ‘let them or the world think what it likes. I had no choice—you don’t know; it was the only door open to me in—bah! Come back now, or they will wonder what we are about.’

He gave her his arm without a word,

simply because he could not, dared not, trust himself at that moment, and they mingled with the others once more ; but Castleton did not play again, nor did the actress change her *rôle* of looker-on, somewhat to the vexation of M. Eustache.

Before three, Castleton, on his way home, posted her letter.





CHAPTER XI.

'A VERY ODD LETTER,' AND A VERY ODD
VISITOR.

DIVA of Bohemia, actress, detective's secret agent again,—
Lytton's lines, written of magnificent Bolingbroke might, if in a lesser sphere of action, have been applied to Margherita La Mara,—

'With Protean grace, through every change she sports,
Now awing senates, now perplexing courts.'

Last night the rich and complex character of Violette D'Orsay had held hundreds spell-bound. The hours between midnight

and dawn had seen her, none the less acting still, poor heart, the star of a gambling *salle*—the centre of attraction amongst a lot of more or less wild, dissipated men—the morning beheld her the *employée* of detective machinery, pulling the wires at the writing-table.

Beside her lay a letter in a little, cramped French hand, commencing 'Mon cher, M. Castleton,' and signed Auguste Croumassier. It was certainly very singular, or would have been if any uninitiated ghost had been at her shoulder, that after closely studying this letter for some time, Mademoiselle Margherita wrote a letter in precisely the same little, cramped French hand, signed it with precisely the same name, only her letter was written to M. Croumassier's lawyer in Paris, and gave him the information that he (the supposed writer) had reason to believe that Anna Ferrara had fled with a certain



English gentleman named Dysart, whose sister had nursed him in his last illness, and probably knew something about the matter. 'I do not,' continued the letter, 'at present desire that Madame D'Amville should get hold of the least suspicion that we have any trace of poor Anna, lest possibly she might circumvent us. I have indeed written to her by this same post to the effect that if I cannot find out the heiress of Louise de Montmorenci in a reasonable time, I fear that we shall have to relinquish all hope, and admit her (the Marquise's) claims to the property I hold.'

Now the odd part of Margherita's conduct was that she put this letter into an envelope, a thin foreign envelope, and addressed it to the very woman it was apparently not to reach—the Marquise D'Amville. Still more oddly, she positively wrote another letter, in her own

hand, to her late *chef* M. Michaud, containing certain explanations, and asking him to post the enclosed letter in Paris, at the same time telegraphing to her when he did so, that she might take care to be calling on madame when the letter arrived, which should be so timed as to be delivered by the morning foreign post at twelve.

This letter she posted herself before luncheon, for she thoroughly well knew the value of guarding her outworks to keep the citadel safe from the enemy.

She had not long to wait for information from Mr Emerton, for in a couple of days she received a short note from him :—

‘ The doctor’s address is No. — Brunswick Terrace, Brighton. He is in very large practice, and a very great favourite. He has not been in London since you came over, so cannot have seen you

personally—only of course your photos. Take care of your disguise, for your beauty is rather a trouble in that respect.—
Yours, etc., R. E.'

'Not the least, mon brave,' commented the possessor of the beauty, as she burned the little scrap; 'you won't know me yourself, if you travelled down with me by chance.'

Coming back from the theatre on the following Saturday afternoon, directly the performance was over, she said only to M. Eustache.

'I am going away in an hour or two, monsieur, and shall not be back till to-morrow evening, or Monday morning, perhaps.'

'Très bien, ma chère, très bien,' answered Eustache coolly; he and his wife knew of course that she was still for some purpose in or connected with M. Michaud's employ,

and, therefore, nothing she did excited the least surprise in them, and certainly asked no question. 'Adieu then,' he added; 'I will tell Hortense.'

And so they parted.

.

'A lady wishes to see you, please, sir.

The announcement was made by a very trim, painfully-respectable man out of livery, and addressed to his master late on Saturday evening. Dr Halcombe was a fine-looking man of middle age, with a pleasant, kindly face and gentle voice, which is certainly a gift especially agreeable in a medical man.

'Who is it, Davies?' he said, rising at once.

'A stranger, sir, and a foreigner too. I have shown her into the consulting-room.'

To which apartment Dr Halcombe repaired. New patients and calls upon his services at all sorts of times were of course

of every day occurrence to a man in large practice. A lady rose as he entered, half throwing up her veil—a tall, unmistakably foreign woman, whose age might have been anywhere between thirty and forty, for such hair, as a close bonnet and widow's cap left visible on the forehead, it showed had much grey amongst its brown locks, and the dull yellow brown of the once probably bright complexion, the deep lines about the eyes and mouth, had not left much more than the wrecks of a beauty that must have been considerable.

‘I am not here as a patient, Dr Halcombe,’ she said, and the accent was very foreign, the voice weak and husky, as if from recent illness or trouble, ‘but as an inquirer.’

The doctor bowed, motioned the stately lady to her seat again, and took one himself, repeating her last word interrogatively,—

‘An inquirer, madam?’

'Si, signor, and I venture to hope that when I tell you for what end I am here, you will answer my questions if you can,' she paused, apparently mastering agitations, then added abruptly,—

'Were you not, some sixteen or seventeen years ago, at a place called Monk's Hill?'

'Yes.'

'And while there you attended a gentleman who died of typhus or typhoid fever, I know not which, named William Dysart?'

She said that eagerly, bending forward as if almost life hung on his reply, and added quickly, as he hesitated,—

'Cielo! there is no breach of honour or faith in answering that, surely?'

'No,' said the doctor slowly; 'no; but I am not fond of answering anything in the dark. Still, so far, I did attend the gentleman you name, but in vain. He died of the fever.'

‘Thank you,’—the lady seemed relieved—‘and I dare to hope that, when you hear my story, and why I ask questions, you will answer me.’

She paused, dashed aside with haughty impatience the tear that had glittered on her long lashes, and went on now steadily, watching him,—

‘I am an Italian, and my maiden name was Ferrara—a proud and ancient family, signor, though an impoverished one. I had one—an elder sister who, when she was a girl of sixteen, fled—curse him!—with an Englishman. All efforts to trace them failed then; and to this miserable day I, the only survivor—her widowed sister—know not whether she is living or dead, wedded or unwedded.’

She stopped, and covered her face a moment, choking back a heavy sob, that went to the doctor’s very heart. He was masculine to the very core;

a woman's distress moved him at once.

'Poor thing,' he said, pityingly ; 'but what can I do ? Why come to me ?'

'Ah ! Madonna mia, signor, but perhaps you can,' the Italian said, eagerly ; 'if you will at least—for since my own residence in your country, I have had good reasons to suspect that the man with whom my poor sister fled was this very William Dysart. And, if I could only be certain of that, he might on his death-bed have named her ; possibly have confessed whether there had been a marriage or not ; whether she lived, and where ; that I might find her. And, signor,'—she clasped her hands in passionate entreaty—'you cannot, dare not refuse to answer such a prayer as mine—for such a purpose ! Did you ever from that man's lips once hear the name of Anna ?'

English gentleman named Dysart, whose sister had nursed him in his last illness, and probably knew something about the matter. 'I do not,' continued the letter, 'at present desire that Madame D'Amville should get hold of the least suspicion that we have any trace of poor Anna, lest possibly she might circumvent us. I have indeed written to her by this same post to the effect that if I cannot find out the heiress of Louise de Montmorenci in a reasonable time, I fear that we shall have to relinquish all hope, and admit her (the Marquise's) claims to the property I hold.'

Now the odd part of Margherita's conduct was that she put this letter into an envelope, a thin foreign envelope, and addressed it to the very woman it was apparently not to reach—the Marquise D'Amville. Still more oddly, she positively wrote another letter, in her own

hand, to her late *chef* M. Michaud, containing certain explanations, and asking him to post the enclosed letter in Paris, at the same time telegraphing to her when he did so, that she might take care to be calling on madame when the letter arrived, which should be so timed as to be delivered by the morning foreign post at twelve.

This letter she posted herself before luncheon, for she thoroughly well knew the value of guarding her outworks to keep the citadel safe from the enemy.

She had not long to wait for information from Mr Emerton, for in a couple of days she received a short note from him :—

‘The doctor’s address is No. — Brunswick Terrace, Brighton. He is in very large practice, and a very great favourite. He has not been in London since you came over, so cannot have seen you

of every day occurrence to a man in large practice. A lady rose as he entered, half throwing up her veil—a tall, unmistakably foreign woman, whose age might have been anywhere between thirty and forty, for such hair, as a close bonnet and widow's cap left visible on the forehead, it showed had much grey amongst its brown locks, and the dull yellow brown of the once probably bright complexion, the deep lines about the eyes and mouth, had not left much more than the wrecks of a beauty that must have been considerable.

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The name came last ; and whatever Dr Halcombe's lips would reply, his face, his very pause, gave at once thus far its answer to the clever actress, the astute detective—he had heard that name from William Dysart's lips.

‘Madame,’ he said at length, ‘you put me in a difficult position ; but I suppose, under the peculiar circumstances, I can hardly refuse to answer. I did hear Mr Dysart, in his delirium, use that name of Anna, but never, I must sorrowfully add, with any allusion to a marriage—only of cruel wrong to her. I had the impression that he spoke of some poor, too trusting girl, whom he had misled, and then abandoned. That is all I can tell you of this sad story. I wish I could do more to help your search.’

‘Thank you for the wish, Dr Halcombe ; thank you for the help you have given me so far,’ the Italian lady answered, earnestly.



'I am now at least sure who was her lover, and I may possibly find out more from his relations, if I can discover them.'

'I hope you may meet with success, Madame,' was Dr Halcombe's answer, as he rose to himself escort his singular visitor to the hall door; and when he had handed her into the fly waiting for her outside, he returned to his drawing-room again with a very thoughtful face indeed, asking himself mentally whether he should yet hear more of this story. How little he dreamed that his strange visitor was a girl of eighteen—the actress about whose beauty and genius all London was talking. What a masque is the world around us!





CHAPTER XII.

WIRE-PULLERS AND PUPPETS.

IN the Sunday night La Mara went back to town; on the Monday morning she received a telegram from Paris, which she read with a satisfied smile, and then quietly burned.

‘Fire tells no tales,’ she muttered, throwing the ashes into her waste-basket; ‘and if speech is silver, silence is golden. I agree with Tallyrand — language is given to conceal thought, as I must prove this morning on Madame la Marquise.’

Madame D’Amville occupied very hand-

some apartments, not very far removed from Lady Caroline's house in Hertford Street ; and a little before twelve a servant announced Mademoiselle La Mara, and in came the young actress, with the easy familiarity of an acknowledged favourite sure of her welcome.

‘ You alone, chère Marquise ? ’ said she lightly, as she drew a dainty little chair to the Frenchwoman's side. ‘ So much the better. It is not often we can catch you for a quiet tête-à-tête, is it ? ’

‘ It is some time since you tried to get it, méchante, ’ retorted the Marquise, tapping the girl's shoulder.

‘ Oh, no, no, Marquise ! Oh, the world's ingratitude ! Why, it was only last week that I called in, to return you your pearl ring, which you lost at écarté to Pierre-point, and which I won back from him the next night, because I knew you prized it so much—won it at—no, never mind what. ’

‘ Too wicked ! Ah, no, you were a good girl ; I know, it was that dreadful—’

‘ Hush—hush—’ cried Margherita, in a laughing stage whisper, ‘ you will think me quite a gambler ; but it was only to recover your ring—it was at baccarat I played for it.’

‘ Oh, naughty girl, I ought to scold you. By-the-bye, why were you not at anybodies’ afternoon on Sunday ? You were missed right and left, I assure you, especially by the men. M. Pierrepoint, I think, was inconsolable.’

The girl’s lip curled, but she said, carelessly, ‘ Oh, *peste* on them all. I had a business engagement, and, of course, could not be anywhere ; and as to Pierrepoint—’

‘ Ma chère, you are really very cruel to him ; he adores you ; he is desperately in love with you ! Ma parole, oui !’

‘ It is a pity such noble affection is so wasted then,’ answered the actress, with



scornful irony ; ' he had better carry such adoration to another shrine.'

' You do not like him, hein ?' asked the Marquise.

' No,' said the other shortly.

' And I do not think,' added Madame D'Amville shrewdly, ' that he loves M. Castleton. Oh now, not he.'

' His likes or dislikes will not break M. Castleton's heart, I daresay.'

Madame laughed.

' No ; men's hearts do not break so easily, do they ? By the way, Margherita,' she had long dropped the formal ' Made-moiselle,' how will you manage about the drive ? this turn-out, I mean ?'

' Oh !' answered the actress, ' but I can easily get back in time.'

' Where shall you go ?'

' Oh, I don't know at all yet, Marquise ; perhaps to lunch at Richmond, and stroll into the park before returning. Ah, there

is the postman's knock below,' she added, as the sharp rat-tat echoed up the stairway; 'and here comes your femme, Mathilde, with letters.'

Only one, however, lay on the tiny salver offered to the Marquise, who remarked, as the maid retired, 'I surely know this hand, yet—'

Certainly the very bright eyes of the detective's agent did, as they glanced at it under the shadow of the long lashes.

'Please do not stand on any ceremony with me, madame,' she said; 'one always is anxious to know the contents of a letter.'

'Ah, c'est vrai; thanks,' and madame opened the letter, while Mr Emerton's agent carelessly turned over the leaves of a book of engravings, and covertly watched the reader's face. First a look of bewildered surprise; a glance again, at the address on the envelope, another over the letter, then amusement, triumph, which



even broke into a little laugh and exclamation,—

‘ Oh ! mon Dieu ; mais c’est drôle ! Il me fait rire. What a mistake of the old fool ! ’

Margherita turned with the prettiest curiosity, the most charming interest in madame’s amusement.

‘ Chère Marquise, may I not share your fun or pleasure ? ’

‘ Share it ! ha, ha ; yes, if you like, mon enfant ; a most ridiculous mistake, but one which may prove of the greatest importance to me at a future time, not perhaps so very far distant. You remember my telling you about the old executor of my late relative, Louise de Montmorenci, so shamefully keeping me out of the property she left ? ’

‘ Yes, certainly,’ answered the actress, with a most interested face and manner ; ‘ he persists that she has other heirs possibly living.’

‘Yes ; a niece, whose death I would give much to prove,’ said Eveline D’Amville ; ‘now, then, read this, which—ha, ha,—stupid old M. Croumassier never meant me of all people to see.’

Never, perhaps, had Margherita felt such a painful inclination to laugh outright, as she took her own letter from the woman who had been before, and was still more now, such a complete tool in her hands, a puppet dancing exactly as she pulled the strings.

‘I can see exactly how the *contretemps* has occurred,’ she said, after a moment’s pause. ‘The old gentleman has written the two letters, enclosed both, and then addressed each, deeming he was sure which was which ; that intended for you has, of course, gone to his lawyer, and then, the lawyer’s reaches you.’

‘Precisely, and he can only allude to Lady Caroline Dysart, whose brother-in-law, I know, was named William.’



‘And whose fortune, I believe,’ said the actress, with a slight upward glance, ‘her fair daughter, his niece, inherited. I wonder, now, if his supposition or information “touching the letter,” is correct. Did you ever tell Lady Caroline about yourself, madame?’

‘Only that I was kept out of some property most cruelly; but never any details or names. Why do you ask, child?’

‘Only, madame, because it strikes me, from this letter, that the writer evidently thinks that Lady Caroline possesses some information about Anna Ferrara and this Mr Dysart, which would be to your advantage to know, and which he, therefore, plainly does not desire you to get hold of. If I were you—ah, pardon, how impertinent I am! It is your affair, not mine, to presume.’

‘Nonsense!’ interrupted the Marquise

eagerly ; ' go on ; you are so clever, advise me. Suggest ; say on, Margherita.'

The girl rose, and leaning lightly against the mantelpiece, so that her face was a little in shadow, said,—

' Well, it is of course possible that Mr Dysart married Anna Ferrara ; and if so, of course, from a worldly point of view, it would be as much Lady Caroline's interest as yours to prove Anna to be dead. It is probably information on this point which this M. Croumassier is afraid you may obtain from Lady Caroline. And why should you not, chère Marquise, if you can ?' added the girl, with a shrug ; ' every one must fight for their own hand.'

' It is true, true !' exclaimed Madame D'Amville. ' What, then, would you do in my place ?'

' I ; say rather, madame, if I were you, with your clever French finesse and tact ; why, I would find a way of telling my

troubles to my dear friend, Lady Caroline. I would show her plainly that her interests and mine were one, directed against the same person, and she would then tell you what she knows of the connection between your relative and hers.'

The Marquise clapped her pretty hands, her eyes sparkling.

'I will do it, chérie. I will do it; but say nothing of this letter—hein!'

'Not unless you wish to lose the whole game,' said the actress quickly; 'nor would I advise you to breathe a hint of my name; it is no business of mine, and it would simply close miladi's lips.'

'Certainly; but I shall tell you the result of the interview.'

'As you please, madame,' said Margherita, smiling. 'Of course, I shall be always interested to hear of your success; but still, your affairs are yours, you know, not mine; only I have been

fortunate enough to be of some use to you, perhaps.'

'My dear girl, you have earned a right to my confidence, and since I am acting on your suggestions, it is only fair that you should know the sequel. It will, though, be a little difficult to get hold of Lady Caroline, as it were inadvertently, without Helen's or visitors' intrusion.'

'Perhaps fate may soon give you the opportunity, *chère madame*,' said La Mara brightly; 'if not, we must see what art can do.'

'I prefer art to fate,' remarked the Marquise; 'and so do you in all ways.'

The actress laughed as she drew on her glove. 'Truly, madame, our own hands mostly weave the warp and woof of our own fate—below here. Adieu, then, for the present, for I suppose you will be at Lady Caroline's party to-night.'

'Yes—shall you?'

‘Professionally, yes. I am engaged to recite, but of course I cannot get there till eleven. *Au revoir!*’ and the wire-puller departed ; her next move must be to make quickly the requisite opportunity for her puppets, and before she had reached Grafton Street, a very feasible scheme presented itself.

It only wanted the co-operation of her actual employer—Albyn Castleton, and of that she was of course sure.

‘But for *you*,’ she muttered, when she was alone, and the small hands were pressed on her breast—‘but for you I would throw off this police work. I am strong enough to do that, though I cannot fling aside Eustache. But this shall be the last of that service. This for his sake, though he will never know it.’

Poor child ! envied by so many, and yet so little to be envied. How few of us would ever be so envied if we could

see into the soul's sacrarium, instead of only seeing the mask which, more or less, we all wear to each other !

It was a little after eleven when she entered Lady Caroline Dysart's drawing-room ; and even while the hostess turned to greet her, her quick eye perceived amongst the guests the two men she especially wished to see that night, Albyn Castleton and Charlton Pierrepoint.

' You are good to get here so early, Mademoiselle,' said her ladyship,—the favourite actress was the fashion, you see ; so, though Lady Caroline shared her daughter's dislike, for the same reason, she must needs go with the tide,—' how you must have hurried.'

' Oh, I am a very " quick change lady," madame,' answered the actress, smiling ; ' and besides, to-night it was " L'Une et l'Autre," which is not so long as " Romeo," you know. I am quite at your service whenever you wish it.'

‘Thanks!—presently, then; but you must not be a wall-flower,’ said Lady Caroline, tapping her with her ivory fan; ‘there are still some disengaged—’

‘Not for me, at present, Lady Caroline, thanks; I am a trifle tired, and prefer a quiet chat with one or two I see seated.’

Bowing, she moved away, passing Mrs Castleton on a sofa, with a graceful salute, pausing to speak to the Marquise D’Amville, who was talking to two or three gentlemen rather perhaps past round dances.

‘La Violette looked a bit fatigué to-night,’ was madame’s laughing greeting. ‘Are you tired of that desperate stab at the poor Duchesse? I thought she would have come in with you?’

‘Oh, no, Mrs Kavanagh was not invited;’ and there was more meaning in the speaker’s smile than Madame D’Amville at all detected.

It was Lady Caroline's cue to stand very well with Rex Castleton and his wife, and one importation from the stage, one denizen of Bohemia (who must be there) was enough. She herself only cared to touch the confines of Bohemia with the gloved tips of her dainty fingers, and she scarcely wished to have even that touch put in bodily form before stately Constance Castleton. She had been a little fearful of asking even pretty little Mrs Bury-Talmer, but decided that the 'Professor' husband carried her out of the debateable ground. Poor helter-skelter, horsey, good-natured Lady 'Harry' was banned, of course. Like many people of her kind, Lady Caroline raised a Frankenstein in Albyn's sister-in-law, and alarmed herself accordingly.

As soon as that set was ended, she smilingly called upon the Italian for recitation number one, almost before those of



the young men who had danced had time to consign their several partners to chaperonnes, and gather about the diva. Albyn Castleton cared little, but saw, and in his own adroit way quickly defeated mamma's manœuvre. He brought fair Helen to his sister's sofa, talked to them in his brilliant, rattling way, until the recitation began, and then, half way through it, drew back a little, and moved quickly on to another group.

When the rich, soft voice of the artiste ceased, he was amongst those nearest to where she stood ; and while the applause still went round, it was only the natural, proper courtesy for him to step forward and greet her, offering his arm to lead her to a seat. To murmur the quiet words, 'I must speak to you soon' with smiling lips as she took his arm, seemed only the response to his greeting ; and then, still leaning on his arm, she was

receiving, in her sweet, unaffected way, the compliments and thanks to which she was so used.

‘Something more!’ she said to several pleaders; ‘oh, no, not now—thanks. I could not so usurp attention; it is the dancers’ turn now again, you know.’

‘Will you honour me then, Mademoiselle?’ said Albyn.

‘Perhaps—if you will first take me to have an ice,’ said she laughingly.

‘With the greatest pleasure;’ and they moved away to the refreshment room below.

Of course, there were many other couples in and out, chatting, flirting, eating ices, and so on; but it was easy, in the sheltering buzz of sounds that filled the atmosphere, for the couple to exchange a brief conversation in Italian, which, indeed, if overheard, what could be more natural than that this Italian girl should use her

own language to one who spoke it so purely as Albyn? A very few words informed her employer of the substance of that day's interview with Madame la Marquise ; and then she added,—

‘Now, I must make a speedy opportunity for her, and for that I want your aid.’

‘It is yours.’ His dark eyes sparkled. To do her lightest bidding was dangerous happiness, and he made no attempt to disguise that truth from himself now. ‘What am I to do?’

‘Have you a vacant place still in your drag?’

‘Yes, certainly,’ he answered.

‘Offer it, then, to madame ; over-rule and out-flatter any prejudices she may advance, and tell her we are going to Richmond to lunch there, and stroll in the park, which she has never yet seen.’

‘You are not going to condemn me to

flirt with her in the said stroll, in pity's name?' said Castleton, in half comic, half serious, and rebellious alarm. He had not forgotten the threat of Amabel Carruthers.

Margherita laughed out.

'Not so bad if I did, is it? No, you must leave her to Lady Caroline, who must be there too. She and her daughter on the drag I was destined for by its owner.'

'Whew-w!' went Albyn softly; 'he hasn't asked them, I know.'

'No; but he shall, and drive to Richmond, too,' said La Mara, glancing up.

'How will you manage that?'

She laughed slightly, and rapidly twisted her fingers in and out, looking into his face.

'That is what a woman can always do with you men. Do—why dance with him, flirt with him, then pique him. Hush!'

for Albyn's lips were suddenly compressed, and the blood flushed to his bronzed cheek ; ' what does it matter for me ? You do your part for me with madame, and I will manage the rest,' she added, smiling. ' Now, come back, and before the party breaks up we can easily exchange notices of success.'

' You do not, then, contemplate failure of your arrangements ?' said Castleton, as they made their way back to the drawing-room.

' Hardly, when a conceited man and vain woman are to be the puppets to my wires,' was the reply.

Albyn laughed, took her to a seat beside Mrs Bury - Talmer, and went off to obey his orders about the Marquise D'Amville.

Margherita's task, if utterly distasteful, was certainly for her not difficult, for degraded and degrading though Pierrepont's

passion was, she knew that he was in love with her, and madly jealous of the man he had chosen, rightly or wrongly, to raise into a rival. She had only to work unscrupulously upon those bad passions to make him play into her hands, far too clever, though, to commit herself at all. Oh, no ; she would, like Temple—

‘ Swerve, and let the thrust go by—
Cry, with a smile, “ But empty air you pierce.”
Turns the quick wrist, and, presto ! pinks in tierce.’

Though he had not yet done more than bow in the distance, she knew quite well that since Castleton had joined her, Pierrepont’s jealous attention had never really been withdrawn from her ; and she had only now to—by chance of course—catch his eye and smile slightly to bring him to her side.

‘ You have been the vanishing point of the picture, Mr Pierrepont, ever since I

came in,' she said, as Kate Bury-Talmer turned to chatter to Captain Calvert.

'Was that my fault?' he half-whispered, bending down.

She allowed the slightest possible little toss of her head to be visible ; the faintest suspicion of pique to show in her tone.

'I don't know ; you were better occupied, I suppose.'

He had begun flirting with Helen Dysart the moment he saw the actress enter the room. His eyes gleamed. Had he succeeded in piquing the beautiful diva ?

'That could not be,' he said, eagerly. 'You must know that, Mademoiselle.'

She glanced up, dropped her eyes quickly under his gaze, and shrugged her shoulders.

'I do not know it, indeed, And Miss Dysart is very lovely, isn't she? Somebody told me'—this with a nonchalance

meant for him to read as only veiling pique—‘that Mr Albyn Castleton was very attentive to her the other night at his brother’s house. Why don’t you offer her the box-seat on your drag, and show him—’

The actress stopped abruptly, bit her lip, and half-raised her fan, as if in slight confusion, and added quickly, as if saying just something to cover what seemed betrayal of a jealous difference between herself and Castleton,—

‘Though, of course, her mother would chaperone her.’

‘I’ll ask them both, if you wish it,’ said her dupe, in a low, eager tone.’

‘Bah! it is nothing to me whom you take,’ said the Italian, in a tone that made the reply read in the reverse. ‘I only made a suggestion, but still—we are going to Richmond on the —th, as the Marquise has never yet been there, and

the park is so lovely for a stroll after luncheon.'

'Yes ; "with thee to reign,"' murmured Pierrepont, almost in her ear, 'Gehenna itself would be lovely.'

'I should not like to try it, then,' she said, rising with a half-laugh, and quite satisfied that she had gained her end, however bitter to herself the means were. 'Another dance, I think, and then, I suppose, another recitation.'

'You will honour me this time, Made-moiselle.'

Margherita could not well refuse. And later, when Castleton was putting her into her carriage, she said, *sotto-voce*,—

'I have succeeded.'

'So have I. Good-night.'

He stepped back, and looked for a moment after the retreating carriage.

'Yes. Good-night, my darling ! my Blackbird !'



CHAPTER XIII.

A GLIMPSE WITHIN.

'Tis but the old, old story, yet it ever abideth new ;
And to whomsoe'er it cometh, his heart it breaks
into two.'

TOO truly thus sadly sings the German poet Heine. The conflict of human passions, the battle between heart and pride, between honour and dishonour, is old indeed as the world's history, yet new to each life into which the conflict comes ; new to each heart it breaks, each happiness wrecked ; none the less if thought and count of the future, of an inevitable end to such battle, be reck-



lessly and desperately put aside for the sake of the happiness of the present. So now with Albyn Castleton, proudest son of a proud race, whose pure escutcheon had never been stained with one quartering that had the bar sinister to cross it. He knew well that he loved this beautiful, nameless girl as he had never loved woman before, and yet he could not, would not tear himself away from her sunshine ; would not bring himself to the bar of conscience, and realise or face the truth, that she should be to him all or nothing. Did he, in his manhood's pride, think that he could go just so far and no further, and then draw back at will ?—fling himself into the flood tide, and then leave it when he chose to strike out for the shore ?

Which of us can dare trust our fallible humanity to play with temptation, and then have power to fling it from us when

so fostered. Its sudden uprising in overwhelming weight appals us, and then haply it is too late. Spoiled favourite of family and society all his life, here it was that the evil of it came out, here that the cloven foot showed itself in the fine, impassioned, but wayward nature, so unguided and undisciplined, with so much that was loveable and good in it, and so many faults to cloud the brightness.

‘His darling, his Blackbird,’ he had called her passionately; and let the future chance as it might—crushing down thought—and like too many of us, putting off all listening to the unwelcome ‘still, small voice’ to a more convenient season. But could she, that poor, lonely, motherless Blackbird do the same; she who, child and girl, had loved him all her life—all the more because she had had nothing else to love; who had clung to the ideal, the memory, in the blank years, as she



struggled bravely through such turbid waters to reach his world; who for his sake had moved scatheless amongst temptations which few, perhaps, in her place, trained up as she had been, would have resisted; offers that would quickly have given her genius scope, and placed her on that pinnacle to which her vaulting ambition soared. She who had lived for him, worked for him, loved him, and yet whose greatest dread was that he should discover in her the Blackbird, and ask himself whether the woman's heart remembered and endorsed the child's declaration; dreaded it the more because then—then she feared him and feared herself more. No, this girl could not shut out thought, as he did so determinedly; her whole life and training had of necessity been one of self-control, self-search, that she might the better search and control others — prove herself that she might

prove others, both as detective and dramatic artist.

She knew that even if he cared for her, the nameless outcast, dared not, never could be anything to him; he would one day give hand and heart to one whose birth was as stainless as his own. God send him happiness with such a one! and then almost as the prayer had passed her lips, she who, that very night, had stooped her womanhood for him, she who loved him—the very woman in her broke down, and she flung herself on the couch with a smothered, but oh, such bitter cry, — ‘Albyn! O Albyn! will any one love you as I have done all my life!’

Poor motherless girl; the human heart would have its way sometimes in spite of all the schooling; and after all, whatever were the faults of its object, this pure loyal love of hers had been to her a



saving power amidst all the dross and sear of her life. Still the new day, with all its chequered lights and shades, came round again, and work, the blessed work that is the best panacea for aching hearts, began once more, and she had her reading, her music, and professional studies to pursue.

The girl was an indefatigable worker, and genius was so true and loyal that she was never fully satisfied with herself, and eagerly sought the severest criticism from the few on whose judgment she could rely ; indeed, Albyn would laugh and declare that he believed she was better pleased with fault-finding critiques than with nothing but praise.

‘Of course, I am only eighteen, and must of necessity have so much to learn, and one cannot learn too much.’

‘I wish more on the boards thought so, my dear,’ said Addison, laughing, and

patting her shoulder approvingly, and Castleton added,—

‘She’s right enough, too. “Learning is the wing upon which we fly to Heaven,” you know ; it’s certain that ignorance drags all to one level.’





CHAPTER XIV.

THE TURN-OUT OF THE FOUR-IN-HAND.

WHETHER in a great or small way, a structure to stand must be built on strong foundation and machinery, to do its work well and effectually, must be worked by clever subordinates as much as by a clever chief. In his wide sphere of action no one knew this better, and consistently carried it out, than the late deeply-lamented and talented Lord Beaconsfield, who all his life gathered about him clever men, and brought forward clever men, so much so indeed that as a rule for a young man to be one of

his *protégés* was at once to stamp him as worth something ; and in this lay one of the great secrets of his own success.

In her very, very much smaller sphere of action, Margherita La Mara had always followed out steadily the same line of policy. She would not employ or work with any but clever assistants when aid was needed, — ‘A fool,’ she would say to her chief, ‘is worse than useless; he is in the way, and certain to spoil the best-laid plan.’

She had not deviated from her platform in the latest move she had made in her case, that of, in fact, compelling the Marquis to be unconsciously her agent.

The Parisian was a clever woman, and therefore the still more clever Italian used her as a tool. Having herself laid the train well, she felt secure that her tool, in her own interest (as she believed), would not show her cards, but might safely be



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left to carry out the details of the interview, the opportunity for that being given her by the wire-puller, and until that interview had taken place, and its results were in her possession, she could do nothing more. Of Pierrepont, she had simply made a complete tool.

‘I have only now to hope that the day will be fine,’ she said to Castleton in the green-room on the Monday night before, ‘for if not, all our trouble will have been expended for nothing.’

‘It is no trouble to me to do your behest,’ he said, with a glance that pointed the words; ‘I should be the greatest loser after all.’

She turned away with a beating heart, glad that the next minute she had to go on the stage. If she, too, were playing with fire, she could not help it even if she would.

But the morning of the turn-out set at

rest all fears for her scheme, as far as weather was concerned, for the beauty of the day tempted a gay throng to the Magazine to witness the turn-out of the club ; spectators on foot, on horseback, in open carriages, and amongst these last were Squire and Mrs Castleton, although to Constance much if not nearly all the pleasure of the gay scene was marred by the knowledge of who was to fill the post of honour on her brother's drag.

'I wonder,' she said, with a displeased shadow on her fair face, as the first coach came in sight, 'I wonder, Rex, how many more fast theatrical sort of people that racketsy boy will choose to have on his drag for Helen Dysart to see.'

'My dear Connie, are you not just a little prejudiced against this young actress, because she is an actress, and at Albyn's theatre? I think—'

'I think,' said Constance, severely,

‘that M. Eustache ought to take better care of his niece ; but you’re all alike, you men, young or elderly, a pretty woman can twist you round her little finger.’

‘Well, my dear,’ said the good-natured squire gallantly, ‘I hope that Albyn’s experience won’t be worse than mine has been. I haven’t objected to a pretty woman’s whole hand, let alone one finger, for many years.’

‘Don’t talk nonsense, Rex,’ but for all that she broke out into a smile, despite the ‘nonsense,’ and only remarked, somewhat irrelevantly, that the fact was Albyn had been so spoiled by them all, and it was a great pity to have left a theatre to a young man.

Rex wisely held his tongue, and the next moment there was a movement in the crowd, a murmur, a turning of heads—and up to the rendezvous came two more drags, the first of which, drawn by a mag-

nificent team of black horses, and superbly appointed, attracted the most notice, none the less for its bright, handsome driver and company, for at Albyn's side sat the beautiful actress, whom most there recognised, while on the seat behind sat Mrs Bury-Talmer, Charles Addison of the Parthenon, and Madame D'Amville, and the third seat was occupied by Louis Wayland and Lady Harry Welsden. Poor Constance Castleton ! I am afraid that in her opinion her fear was justified.

‘By Jove ! Connie, it is a splendid turnout altogether !’ exclaimed the squire ; ‘horses, drags, and company.’

And then they were seen by those on the drag, and salutes were exchanged ; then, of course, several more coaches, and amongst them Pierrepont's, with Helen Dysart, radiant in blue and white on the box seat, and her mother and two or three others behind, and in a few more

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minutes the whole procession went off, a fair sight indeed, perhaps one of the finest the London season has to show, if the day be fine.

Two only of the number turned off westward, bound for Richmond, Pierrepoint and the man he hated as a rival, Castleton leading at a distance, which his high-mettled team would fain have increased far more speedily than their master chose; of course, the whole party caused a sensation along the whole route as they passed along. One lady, about fifty, in a sober, even conventual garb, was just about to cross at one point, but had to stop, and in the actual moment the drag dashed past her she had to half veil her eyes before the cloud of dust it raised. Ah, if she had only looked up in time to see the beautiful face turned at that moment to Castleton's, as she answered his question,—

‘Did you notice that lady, Margherita?’

‘Yes; I saw her stop at the crossing; why?’

‘Because, if my memory does not play me false, I am sure she is Arthur Featherstone’s sister Alice, of whom we were speaking one night at the Trois-Etoiles, I think.’

‘I remember; she is a trained nurse, you said.’

‘Yes; I didn’t know she was in or near town at all—I haven’t seen Featherstone for a long time,—dear, respectable old frump,’ said Albyn, laughing; ‘he used to lecture me no end, but I think he’s given me up as a hopeless scamp this good while.’

‘And he is not far wrong,’ answered La Mara wickedly. ‘Only you are too far gone to be the Telemachus to his Mentor.’

‘I should hope so, for I do think,’ said Castleton energetically, ‘that of all forms or disguise under which classic fancy ever

put a woman, Mentor was the most intolerable nonsense ! His—or her—goodness and desperate wisdom were positively insufferable !’

‘I always wondered that Telemachus did not throttle Mentor half way through their journey,’ laughed Margherita.

‘Telemachus, my dear,’ said Addison from behind, ‘was, you see, a much better regulated young person than either you or Castleton. Your sentiments make me tremble for my life if I ever venture to offer you good advice.’

‘My dear fellow,’ retorted Albyn, with a bright glance back, ‘when you turn Mentor we’ll—go to tea. The character would quite spoil you ; it’s not indigenous, my friend.’

So laughing and chaffing, as if none of them had one idea or thought but of the sunshine and pleasure of the hour, they presently reached the famous Star and

Garter, where Pierrepont and his party now joined them for luncheon, to which all were no doubt quite ready to do fair justice.

‘And after lunch,’ said Castleton, obediently acting upon his orders, ‘I shall propose an adjournment across into the park for a stroll, at anyrate for my people, one of whom,’ bowing to the Marquise, ‘is a stranger to its beauties.’

Helen Dysart exclaimed, ‘How charming, Mr Castleton!’

The actress gave Pierrepont a fleeting glance. Her *rôle* must not be too suddenly dropped, and he said at once,—

‘Ladies wishes are law. I second the proposal on behalf of my people.’

The train was completely laid now, and for the rest the agent could perfectly trust to her tool’s quick French wits to take advantage of the situation, just apparently by Fortune’s chance before her. Margherita knew well enough that she herself

and Helen Dysart and the pretty, lively Butterfly, to say nothing of Lady Harry, were quite enough, without any effort, to keep all the men of the party in their company if the two oldest of the ladies chose to rest on a bench, which Lady Caroline, a woman of between forty and fifty, was, she guessed, most likely to do after her luncheon, instead of strolling far. So also guessed Madame D'Amville, though for herself, some years younger, and a smaller, less robust-built woman, she did not care. The Marquise knew this well enough, and, in view of it, remarked once or twice, as they all strolled about in several detached groups, that her head ached a little.

‘I think,’ she said at length to Lady Caroline, as they approached an empty bench under a splendid old tree, ‘that I shall sit down for half-an-hour in the shade and it will pass off.’

‘I will keep you company then, Eveline,’ said Lady Caroline generously, delighted at the opportunity; ‘and we can soon find the younger people presently.’

Madame demurred, and positively refused to allow Castleton or Margherita, who offered to remain, but she suffered herself to be overruled by Lady Caroline, and with her turned aside to the bench.

‘Mon Dieu! she would not have made a bad *agent-de-police* if she had been trained,’ said the agent, with a soft little laugh to her companion as they went off to rejoin the others.

‘Yes; it was a ready expedient,’ answered Castleton. ‘I wonder how the game will end, Margherita.’

How little either of them dreamed how that question would be answered. Meanwhile Madame la Marquise was saying,—

‘It is so kind of you to keep me

company, especially as, to tell you the truth—and I would not say as much to any one but you, Caroline — my headache is caused by worry and anxiety, and the shock, I may call, given me by news sent me by mistake. I don't know that I ought to speak of—of what I was never meant to know, though it concerns me.'

'My dear friend, then you can best judge for yourself to whom you will choose to confide,' said Lady Caroline, with instantly roused curiosity, as madame intended.

'You think so? Ah yes, your judgment is so clear, your heart so sympathising, and I—I have no one else to confide in here, and you can help me if you will, I believe, if this extraordinary coincidence is true.'

'You interest me very much, Eveline, and, of course, if I could be of any help to you, I shall be most happy.'

‘How can I thank you? It is about the property left by a cousin which I once told you the old executor kept me out of so shamefully.’

‘Yes,’ said Lady Caroline, on the very tip-toe of curiosity. She had always thought there was something more than health at the bottom of her dear friend’s lengthened residence in London. On that point, however, she was not fated to be enlightened. The Parisian was far too wide-awake a lady to trust even sa chère amie Anglaise with the secret of her banishment for an actual criminal offence. Oh no, she told as much of the story as she chose, and, of course, from her point of view. Nor did she mention any names till she came up to the present.

‘Of course,’ she went on, ‘you can see that, if I can get proof of this runaway niece’s death, I must have the old lady’s property.’



‘Certainly, I see that ; but cannot you prove her death, then—for, of course, the villain didn’t marry the girl ?’

‘That I cannot prove, it is my difficulty,’ answered Madame D’Amville, covertly watching the other’s face ; ‘but quite lately, by a mistake in posting letters, I got hold of information meant to be kept back and used against my claims.’

‘And that information ?’ said Lady Caroline, leaning back on the bench and folding her two hands on her lap.

‘Was,’ answered the Marquise slowly, ‘to the effect that the executor had discovered the companion of Anna Ferrara’s flight’—Lady Caroline started—‘was a gentleman named William Dysart, whose sister-in-law nursed him in his last illness.’

Lady Caroline had suddenly set her lips close when William Dysart’s name was uttered ; but she now drew a breath

of relief, it seemed. What had she feared from the next words, or had she feared at all? Was it only the outcome of a shock of surprise and pain at a discovery? Whatever it was, however, the woman had recovered herself in those few moments, and decided on something.

‘I was that sister, of course,’ she said, laying her hand on the other’s arm; ‘and I am grieved, indeed for the honour of a noble name, that this poor girl was a relative of yours. I do not pretend that, from a worldly point of view, I do not see that it is both for your interest and my child’s that matters should be as they are; but still, I would it were not so.’

‘You do know, then!’ exclaimed the Marquise, with intense and very real eagerness; ‘you will surely tell me all you know of Anna!’

Lady Caroline moved a little, and passed



her hand over her lips, as if in distress and pain of mind ; but she said steadily,—

‘What I know I will tell you gladly ; but I fear it will not help you in your claims. Poor William was a *roué*, and his last act, it seems, outmatched all the rest. He raved out in his delirium so much about this Anna Ferrara, that in a lucid interval I questioned him, and he then confessed that it was an Italian girl he had betrayed, and finally tiring of her and her infant girl, had deserted them both to return and marry the heiress to whom he was engaged, and which engagement he then wrote and broke off. At this time he did not know whether his victim was living or dead, poor thing. Of course the child, if even alive, could never stand in the way either of your inheritance or that of my daughter ; but the mother, Anna, if alive, could take yours, of course. I wish I were certain

of her death, but still I think I feel sure that there is little doubt of it.'

'I wish I could make executors or courts of law as certain,' said the Marquise bitterly; 'but our conviction will not do!'

'No,' said Lady Caroline, looking full at her for a moment; 'and as, of course, the executor has long ago done everything possible to find the girl, it would be worse than useless for you to attempt it.'

'I should not attempt it for that very reason.'

Lady Caroline leaned back again with an air and a look in her eyes of sudden relief, as she said, with an odd, hard little laugh,—

'Besides, my dear Eveline, you might just succeed in proving that she is alive, and so cut your own throat; for, of course, after a certain time, the law must assume

the legatee's death, unless your French law is very strange indeed. Better let sleeping dogs lie, Eveline; I should, if it were my interest that this Anna Ferrara should not be found.'

'And this, then, is all you know of the matter?' said Madame D'Amville, much disappointed.

'All I know,' repeated Lady Caroline emphatically; 'and, I assure you, all I want to know; we had quite enough of William Dysart's escapades, without our courting the appearance and sentimental claims of a forsaken mistress and child of his.'

'Certainly not.' The Marquise rose, having learned all she could, and added— 'I suppose we had better stroll on a little way now, and join some of our party, if you are rested. I think I see three of them in the distance.'

'Which? I cannot quite make them out,' said Lady Caroline, eye-glass in hand.

‘It is Mr Castleton, Mrs Bury-Talmer, and—yes—Diva Mara.’

At which last Helen’s mother frowned. Certainly Pierrepont was heir presumptive to a rich baronetcy, with one frail child’s life between ; but Albyn Castleton’s fortune was his own, and Helen liked him best, and ‘she must settle soon,’ her mother muttered, setting her lips. Why ‘must,’ she best knew.





CHAPTER XV.

IN LA MARA'S DRESSING-ROOM.

AS the two parties met, one quick, keen glance at Madame D'Amville's face, smiling though it was, told the actress that in some shape the result of her interview with Lady Caroline had not been quite satisfactory to her interests, but La Mara said, with the most charming solicitude,—

‘Dear Marquise, I hope that your headache is better?’

‘Oh, it is quite gone, I am happy to say,’ answered the Frenchwoman—‘pouf pouf, in this delicious air. What a fine park this is, Mr Castleton!’

‘But you have only seen a corner of it, Marquise,’ said Albyn, ‘and it would be quite a day’s pleasure to explore all its beauties.’

‘And just now,’ added the actress, holding out her watch to him, ‘I fear I must remind you that some of your party are slaves of the public, and must rendezvous at four o’clock.’

Mrs Bury-Talmer cried out, ‘Bother you theatrical people, and the stage too.’ But Madame D’Amville took Margherita’s arm as the party began to move towards the gates again, and said,—

‘But you would not wish to say ‘bother’ such an artiste as this.’

‘I wonder where my daughter and party have strayed,’ said Lady Caroline, looking about; ‘but as we do not start till later, I believe, it does not matter. I shall go back to the hotel to see your coach off, Mr Castleton.’



‘You honour us, Lady Caroline. Ah, see, there are my other three come to look for “we”—as the west country folks say.’

They saw too, and waited till they came up to the gates—Charles Addison, Wayland, and Lady Harry Welsden.

‘Come, we must not be late, you tiresome fellow!’ exclaimed the manager. ‘I was coming to find you all.’

‘Plenty of time, Charlie. I’ll make my quartet of quadrupeds play the return march prestissimo, if you like.’

‘Thank you, and capsize us all,’ returned Addison, laughing. ‘Lady Caroline, we have just met your fair daughter and Mr Pierrepont with some of the party.’

‘Thanks, Mr Addison, I was just now wondering where they all were.’

They all went on together, and the Marquise found it impossible to say one word in private to La Mara; the actress was far too clever to give her the least chance of

such an imprudence, whilst Lady Caroline was even within sight ; for with this girl all her outworks were as carefully guarded as the citadel. She knew their value, just as a good cricketer knows that good fielding wins more matches than the batting or bowling.

The coach, with its splendid team held by the groom, stood ready, with an admiring crowd to stare, and stare double, if possible, to see real live actor and actress off the stage. Then they all mounted to their places, and the little crowd broke into an irrepressible cheer as the whole equipage swept off in splendid style away up the London Road.

Madame D'Amville, however, was dying to tell Margherita what had passed in her interview, and ask her advice, to see if it coincided with that of Lady Caroline Dysart. If so, well and good ; if not, then the Marquise would certainly act ex-



actly as that clever Mara advised. She, at least, could have no possible interest, one way or the other, in the story of William Dysart, and the ill-fated Anna Ferrara. Nor had she personally ; but she had every interest as concerned her employer Albyn Castleton. Poor Marquise ! she had not a notion that that clever Mara had all her life been as consummate an actress off the stage as on it.

The play to-night was 'L'Une et l'Autre,' and as Margherita in the third act (wherein was the famous gambling scene) stood in the wings waiting for her cue, she thought she caught sight of Eveline D'Amville's face at nearly the end of the second row of the stalls, where before she had noticed a vacant place.

When she was on the stage she took the first opportunity of finding herself near the footlights to glance that way, but from the stage the glare thrown up

from the footlights, makes it difficult to see plainly the faces nearest to them in the stalls, and in such a cursory glance the actress could not be sure that it was Madame D'Amville.

At the close of the act as usual the three leading artists were called before the curtain, and amongst the bouquets thrown to the two ladies, was one from that very end of the stalls, thrown so skilfully that it dropped exactly at La Mara's feet. Gathering it up with the others she bowed again, and swept from the stage, but she saw that in the heart of that particular bouquet there nestled a tiny note.

It would probably have shared the fate contemptuously accorded to many another billet-doux so conveyed, viz., being burned unread in their beautiful recipient's dressing-room,—but for her idea that it came from the Marquise.



The result was that the moment the play was over, and while the applause was still ringing from pit to gallery, a young woman, dressed very quietly in black relieved by the daintiest little white mob cap, came up to Madame D'Amville and touched her as she rose.

‘Will you follow me, please madam; my mistress will see you in her dressing-room.’

The Parisian lady followed her guide through what to her appeared to be a maze of passages, and was in a few minutes ushered into a good-sized and elegantly-fitted apartment.

‘Ma’amselle will be here directly madam,’ the dresser said, placing a *fauteuil*, and proceeding to get ready her mistress’s ordinary attire. ‘She was in the green-room just now.’

But not as the girl spoke, for there was a rustle of rich satin robes and the young

actress came in, with the jewelled antique dagger in her hand.

‘My dear Marquise, I am quite at your service now, if you do not mind my transposing myself back to the nineteenth century the whilst.’

‘And washing off your war paint too, I suppose,’ rejoined madame.

‘Oh, I never use much of that, you know; and here, you see,’ added the girl, laughing, ‘I have none, for as in Act III. I nearly murder the Duchesse, and only a few minutes ago have died at my lover’s feet, my native lack of colour only looked the proper ghastliness under the gaslight.’

‘That horrid dagger,’ said the Marquise, shuddering, as the light flashed on its tempered steel blade, ‘what if an accident happened,—if either you or Mrs Kavanagh slipped as you pointed it at her breast it could wound.’

‘It could kill,’ said the actress, hand-

ing the weapon to her dresser to lock carefully up with the jewels of which she had quickly and deftly divested her mistress as she talked ; ' when the season ends and the piece is run off, I shall take it back to the Trois - Etoiles and lock it up. Now, chere madame, what can I do for you ? '

Madame glanced at the dresser, who was unfastening the satin robe now. Margherita laughed.

' Oh ! speak French, madame, and we shall be as good as alone. Gertrude does not understand two words of it. Use no names, that is all ; I shall know whom you mean.'

Madame, as she generally did with La Mara, rushed delightedly into her own language, and recounted what had passed that afternoon, and never dreamed that her listener's pulse was throbbing faster as she said so quietly,—

‘Then, in fact, Lady C. admits that it was your relative whom her brother-in-law so wronged, and that there was a child, a girl, both of whom he had abandoned abroad.’

‘Precisely, *ma chère*; but, of course, as there was no marriage, her daughter’s interests are not affected at all; but for me it matters everything, whether the poor girl is dead or alive. What think you of *miladi*’s advice to me?’

The actress smiled. It would never suit her to have this woman or her agent crossing her lines.

‘I entirely agree with it, *madame*,’ she said. ‘It is almost certain that the girl is dead, and the poor child, if found, could not, of course, interfere with your inheritance. In a year or two more, if you prefer your claim at law, it must presume your relative to be dead, or the executor may feel himself quite



secure and justified in so presuming, and only obtain himself the sanction of the French court by arrangement with you.'

The speaker knew as well as her listener that the latter was really banished from France, and dared neither return nor take any steps to remind the law, which she had criminally broken, of her existence.

Before the Marquise could reply, there was a tap-tap at the door, and a man's voice called,—

'Are you ever coming to-night, my dear? Old Jean Prix has been waiting for you with the carriage an age, and thinks you have eloped.'

'That is Addison,' said Margherita, laughing. 'Come in. I am ready some minutes.'

The manager just put in his head—and came forward.

‘Ah! Marquise, so sorry to disturb your *tête-à-tête*, but we are closing up. Had you your carriage?’

‘I will put madame down at her door,’ interposed the young actress; ‘she came in a hansom. You can put out the lights directly, Gertrude, and go. Come, Marquise.’

Addison gave the Marquise his arm, again apologising, and so followed by La Mara, led her to the stage door, where Eustache’s old man servant Jean Prix was in waiting.

Addison handed the two ladies into the carriage with mutual ‘good-nights,’ and the equipage drove off.

Margherita La Mara had little chance yet awhile to think over the step she had gained that day or the step she should next take, for the brief interval of solitude between the Marquise’s door and No. — Grafton Street was too short for any-



thing but the sense of mental fatigue and weariness. Glancing up as she alighted, she saw that the drawing-room windows were all ablaze with light, and the sound of laughter and voices as she entered the hall told their own tale.

‘Anyone here to-night then, Clarke?’ she carelessly asked the servant who had admitted her.

‘A few people, ma’amselle.’

‘Is Mrs Bury-Talmer or Lady Harry here?’

‘No, miss, only gentlemen; Mr Eustache said he hoped you would join them when you came in.’

‘I am tired,’ she said, shortly, and turned into the dining-room to take some slight supper before she retreated to her own apartments. But either M. Eustache had heard the carriage stop or had watched for her return, for as she turned from the table he came in.

‘Ah, ma chère, you will join us, surely?’ he said, putting a hand on her shoulder; ‘we must not lose the character of the Trois-Etoiles, you know.’

‘I did not know it had any to lose, monsieur,’ said the girl dryly, even bitterly, and shook off his hand.

‘You promised, Margherita, when I wrote to Addison,’ said Robert Eustache, frowning.

She flashed out at that touch of the spur, slight though it was.

‘I keep my promise; am I not the diva of the Trois-Etoiles, the very Queen of Bohemia. I am tired to-night, and if I come in at all, I shall not stop long or play. Who is there?’

‘Only a few,—Pierrepont, Calvert, and one or two others.’

‘I will come for a little while then.’

Outside the drawing-room door she took his arm and entered with him.

'Don't leave your games, gentlemen,' she said, receiving their eager greetings with a languid, half disdainful indifference. 'I am not going to stop long.'

'When you are so late—how cruel you are,' said Captain Calvert.

'Am I?' she dropped Eustache's arm and sank into a conversation chair; 'well, you must mark me "disagreeable" to-night, because I do not mean to be as charming as your painted queens there. Go on, gentlemen.'

'I was not playing,' said Pierrepont, sinking into the seat beside her. 'I was about to leave in despair, but now,' he dropped his voice to a murmur, 'all is changed, although you were so cruel to me to-day at Richmond.'

She flushed haughtily for a moment under his bold gaze, but retorted with a shrug of the shoulders,—

‘If I were, I have no doubt you deserved it.’

‘Does devotion, then, deserve cruelty as a return?’ Pierrepoint whispered, passionately, and as her hand lay on her dress his almost clasped it.

The actress drew it away with a mocking laugh.

‘Words, words, words; you all swear devotion, and look sentimental, and talk nonsense about cruelty! do say something new, if you can; tell me you hate me, for a change.’

‘If I did,’ he said, with a gleam in his eyes like the flash of light on steel; ‘if I did, it would be on the principle that, “there is no hate like love to hatred turned.”’

‘Mon Dieu! you are really quite too clever to-night,’ said Margherita, looking up with the most provoking air of surprise; ‘please make the change then quickly.’

‘You are too maddening, La Mara,’ he muttered; ‘you women forget—’

‘Pardon,’ said the actress, looking full in his face for a moment; ‘there are some things that I for one never forget, although I am only an actress, you know, and with that bitter allusion to the scene at the Bijou club, the beautiful Italian rose, and passing to a card-table, paused beside Captain Calvert, resting her hand lightly on the back of his chair, and smiled when he glanced brightly up. Fred Calvert was rather a favourite of hers, a fact of which she made no secret, and of which the young officer was very proud.

‘I wonder where Castleton is to-night,’ as if she must know, it seemed. ‘Wasn’t he at the Parthenon, La Mara?’

‘No, or he would have been round in the green-room or wings. Did you want him?’

‘Not exactly, only he’s the sort of fellow

one misses so awfully, you know—isn't he ?'

Who knew that better than this girl, who had loved Albyn Castleton from her childish years—childhood she had never had ?—how her heart throbbed as her lips answered so lightly,—

'If I say yes to that, he will be too proud of the distinction — never mind Castleton or me, but attend to your game, or you will be euchred.'

'Ah, if you will say you care—' said he.

'What impudence you have, M. le Capitaine. By the way, you must post a card for me when you go.'

'Death !' cried Calvert, tragically striking his brow. 'Perhaps a letter to some hated rival ! never, madame !'

'Nothing so soul-tearing,' said the actress, laughing ; 'but that tiresome Castleton has got some music of mine, and he

must bring or send it to-morrow ; ' I will write it ready.

She went over to Madame Eustache's davenport in the back room, took a card, and wrote on it, ' Please bring or send me back the music I lent you, I particularly want it to-morrow morning.' ' He will understand that,' she thought, as she addressed it to ' Albyn Castleton, Esq.' and went back to Calvert. ' There, you may read every word,' she said, lightly ; ' but forget it at your peril.'

' What will be the penalty, Mademoiselle ?'

' I would bar your *entré* at the theatre, and not speak to you for a month.'

' Too awful a punishment, diva Mara, for me to incur ; I will consign your missive to the pillar post without fail.'

' Like a good boy ; now, good-night everyone.' She shook hands with the young men, but drew it with a haughty

movement from Pierrepont's eager clasp, and turned to M. Eustache.

'If you must go, mon enfant, good-night,' he said, and his moustache just brushed her soft, dark cheek, as his lips touched it.

No one remained very long after Margherita had left the rooms. Calvert and Gus Anstruther, his opponent at euchre, went off together, Pierrepont, who came out at the same time, turning sharply down into Piccadilly. The other two, as they lighted cigars, looked at each other and laughed.

'What a lark it is,' said Anstruther; 'he's wild because the diva snubbed him, and smiled on others; that card, too.'

'Ha! ha! yes; he's madly jealous of Castleton and every one else too, I think. Of course, she hasn't forgotten that affair at the Bijou, and lets him see it, too.'

'Of course,' rejoined Gus; 'whilst Pierre-

point has neither forgotten nor forgiven Castleton for his splendid defence of La Mara. Lord! how he did turn the tables on Pierrepont. I don't know another fellow who could have done it as Castleton did, without compromising the girl by his very defence, and she the leading actress at his own theatre, too.'

'No— I can't quite make out that same Albyn Castleton either,' said Calvert meditatively; 'I wonder if he's in love with her?'

'Blessed if I can tell,' said Gus, laughing; 'but if he is, or should he be—well whatever he did, he isn't the least bit likely to dream of marrying her, not because she is an actress or Bohemian, but because he is a proud Castleton, whose escutcheon has never yet been stained by a cross of nameless blood.'

'H'm!' said Calvert, 'true enough, and though La Mara passes for Eustache's

niece, no one really, I suppose, could swear that she is, or who, or what she really is ; her only real stand-point is her beauty and genius ; but there's no mistake about her having patrician blood.'

'Not the least,' returned Gus dryly ; 'the only question is, how she got it. Here we are at my chambers, so good-night, old fellow.'

'Ditto.'

And so the two parted, and Calvert posted the missive which Mr Emerton's agent knew would bring her employer the next morning to hear if she had learned anything through her clever *ruse*.





CHAPTER XVI.

‘THINE IS MY HEART AND SHALL BE THINE
FOR EVER.’

ALBYN CASTLETON, always
chocolate over his paper the
an early riser, was sipping his
next morning, when, amongst other letters,
that significant post-card was brought in,
and how instantly the handsome face
changed at the sight of those few lines
—how the dark eyes lighted up, and
the lips smiled at the dangerous happiness
before him. Of course his quick appre-
hension read the carefully-covered words
exactly as the writer meant he should—

simply as a business summons from his paid agent to a private interview. She had gathered something from her ruse of yesterday, and found it necessary to communicate it to him. It was only a matter-of-fact, prosaic business interview, as much as if the request had come from Mr Emerton himself. Still it was not the detective, but the detective's agent who summoned him. He should see her alone, with no one else to claim or divide her attention, and his heart beat faster at that thought as he presently took his way to the Trois-Etoiles.

Ah! was there no self-distrust, no thought of facing the end in this proud, passionate, and all too reckless and undisciplined nature? which, as too many of us do, turned a deaf ear to the whisper of the 'still, small voice' that would have warned him of the danger that lay in this deep love of his—so loyal in truth

that it could not dream deliberately of one wrong thought towards its object, if once it had suffered itself to ask and answer the question, 'What do I mean to do?'

But he had put that question from him from the first when he had seen her on the stage of the 'Clairon,' and he put it from him now.

The old French factotum, Jean Prix, admitted him at the Trios-Etoiles, greeting the well-known visitor and favourite with a bright smile.

'Bon jour, Jean. Mademoiselle is, of course, up this long time, so I can see her, I suppose, if she is disengaged?'

'I will see, monsieur.'

'Thanks ; tell her I have brought the music she wanted.'

He certainly had a roll of music in his hand, but as certainly it was his own and not Margherita's. Jean returned in a few minutes with the request that M.

least hope of the point we most anxiously would establish.'

'A marriage, you mean, between William Dysart and—'

'Yes,' answered the girl, as he paused ; 'I saw the Marquise last night in my dressing-room at the theatre, and learned all that she had got out of Lady Caroline, all that she will ever be able to get from her, and the substance of it is soon told. Lady Caroline told Madame D'Amville that on his death-bed, in a lucid interval, William Dysart confessed to her with bitter remorse that he had induced a young, friendless, but nobly-born Italian girl to fly with him ; that her name was Anna Ferrara.'

'Ha ! then your supposition was correct !' exclaimed Castleton ; 'you were on the right trail !'

'So far—yes,' La Mara answered, 'and a step is gained by it. He went on to admit that after a time he tired of Anna,

and wishing to marry the rich Miss Carruthers, did what other heartless *roués* have done time out of mind—deserted Anna Ferrara and her infant girl abroad, and came to England himself, taking advantage of his mother's illness.'

'A dastard deed,' said Castleton indignantly; 'from first to last, a dastard deed. And that is all Lady Caroline knew of this shameful story?'

Margherita gave him a quick, keen glance, and said, significantly,—

'It's all, at any rate, that she admitted knowing. When the Marquise asked her the question, she replied, "We have had quite enough of William Dysart's escapades, without courting the appearance and sentimental claims of a forsaken mistress and child of his."'

Albyn Castleton rose up abruptly, and walked to the end of the room, came back again, and stopped before the actress.

‘Still,’ he said, bending down a little, ‘the fact is proved that Anna Ferrara did leave a child, and that child a daughter.’

Something strange and meaning in his tone and manner startled Margherita, as if a sudden thought or suspicion had flashed like the shock of an electric current from his mind to hers, that made her shiver sharply, and answer with bitter emphasis, as if flinging back the suspicion,—

‘Ay, an illegitimate daughter, who, even if we found her living, could never be owned—never be the heiress of her grand-aunt Louise de Montmorenci; it is not literally one chance in a thousand that there was a legal marriage—it is scarcely possible, Mr Castleton.’

‘But it is possible,’ he said, slowly, and his gaze never left the beautiful Italian face before him. ‘That Anna Ferrara with her child might have followed her lover to England, in the wild attempt of

finding him, and getting justice; that she failed in that hopeless attempt, and died broken-hearted, leaving her child a poor little outcast in this great strange city; that fortune somehow put the outcast on the stage, and made her famous.'

The actress started to her feet, and for a minute the two faced each other. She deadly pale, he with the blood tinging his dark cheeks; some power within, stronger than himself, was mastering him fast.

'I saw your thought before!' she said, almost fiercely, like one striking out blindly against an overwhelming tide. 'What right have you to dare say that to me—Eustache's niece, his sister's child?'

'No—no—I never believed that story, Margherita, how could I, when'—

She interrupted him haughtily, desperately—

'Mr Castleton, you are taking advantage

of my position towards you. Return to the business in hand, please.'

Almost instinctively she put one hand to that little locket on her heart, as if in some vague dread that it could give the lie to her assertion of parentage ; but her breast heaved, and her hand trembled, despite her long habituated power of control. She feared herself now, and so her power of acting was failing her when she most needed it. Albyn Castleton saw the movement—the trembling hand and quivering lips, and the last slight thread of restraint gave way before the passionate heart that made action and words one unresisted impulse. With one step forward he locked both her slender hands in his own, and bent down.

'Blackbird ! my Blackbird !' he said.

Oh ! for one moment of the strength that fled before that touch and voice, calling her once more by the old familiar



name of long ago, betraying only too faithfully how well he remembered the past, and every word of grateful, undying love the little Arab's childish lips had uttered and her heart kept. The crimson blood swept over the beautiful young face to the very brow, and she tried desperately to free her hands.

'No, no! not that—not that!'

'Why not?' He drew her closer instead of loosing his clasp. 'You are my Blackbird whom I rescued from that bitter January night's snow, whom I have never forgotten, whose eyes puzzled and haunted me the moment I saw them again in Paris, at the Clairon, years later! whose identity with my little Italian outcast I was sure of the night we drove back from the Parthenon; whom I love more than life—my darling, my darling!'

The wild tide swept on all before it, beyond any power to arrest it. Help-

less against the force, yielding to that moment's dazzling happiness, she felt herself clasped passionately to his breast, felt his lips pressed to hers, the close throb of heart to heart, and knew that the secret of her life was her's alone no longer.

'Tell me,' came the low, rich tones again in her ear, 'that you have remembered the child's vow—never to forget me, never to part with that little silver coin. Tell me to open that locket you always wear and find there the token that I hold you all mine—that you love Albyn Castleton.'

That proud name on his lips brought back like a shock all that turned those few seconds of exquisite happiness into the very bitterness of death, and Margherita started from him with a deep, smothered cry of agony.

'Spare me, in pity, in mercy, if only for the sake of the love I have borne

you all my life! It can be, must be, nothing but a dream between a Castleton and a worse than nameless girl, on whose birth lies the bitter brand of shame. We must part, save—save as— O God, that I had died on your heart just now!' she broke out, with a deep, racking sob, almost wringing her hands.

There are moments when the un-governed tempest of human passion and temptation makes very sport of man's whole soul, and forces the better angel to almost abandon his hold of the golden cord; and such a moment of sudden, desperate temptation came now to Albyn Castleton. Brain and heart were chaos; there was no thought of either right or wrong, of honour or dishonour; no definite sense or realisation of the wild, impetuous words that rushed to his lips, as he once more locked that slight form to his heart.

'Never, never! You are mine, and

cannot, shall not part. Our love can be all in all to us !’

‘Oh, Albyn ! oh, Albyn ! don’t make my love for you my worst temptation, for the sake of the mother who bore you.’

That appeal, half of strength, half for strength, was as the flash of lightning in the darkness that suddenly shows the traveller’s startled vision the precipice over which he had well-nigh fallen, and an instant, utter revolution of feeling swept over the man’s whole being. He loosed his clasp, and almost staggered back a step, covering his face.

‘God help me,’ he muttered, brokenly. ‘I was mad, mad ! I knew not, thought not, what I said. I never meant you wrong or harm. Oh ! Margherita, my Blackbird !’ — he turned impetuously again to her, stretching out his hands. ‘Forgive — forget if you can, and take all from me—love, honour, name.’

The actress had never looked more beautiful than she did now, as she stood facing him in all her tender, pure womanhood, her slender hands pressed against her bosom, as she drew back a step and shook her head sadly.

'No, Albyn,' she said softly, steadily; 'your heart speaks in the passion of the moment words you will repent in cooler hours. I love you too well to accept them, and, moreover, proud as yourself, I will never bring the shameful stain that curses my life upon an ancient and stainless name.'

'Margherita, hear me—hear me if you love me!'

'If I love you!' repeated the Italian passionately; 'ay, better than all save honour, from the hour you spoke kindly to the little wretched Arab on your doorstep, and won her childish heart for ever; whom else in Heaven's name have I had

to love? It was for your sake, to save your life, that I went to Emerton and told him of the miscreants who had plotted to murder as well as rob you—my benefactor; for your sake I planned with him to get into your house and give them up to justice; through that I became a police agent, and when I, actress and agent, was sent over to M. Michaud, it was for your sake again, but I worked on and kept in his service because it was serving you, the only being I had ever had to love, however unloved I was! In all the glittering and dire temptations that have beset my path, off the stage and on it, it is this love for you that has saved me and robbed temptation herself of all allurements, that will give me strength to serve you still till this dark story is unravelled to the end; whether I am Anna's child or not matters little, we must part, save us master and agent, and I would to Heaven that you had



never loved me, for then you at least would not have suffered, but now—now—' the impassioned tones faltered at last, and the lips quivered with the young heart's bitter agony, 'you must forget your love if you can, and I—'

'Margherita!' Albyn caught her hands in his own, his voice hoarse with emotion. 'Hear one word! They shall—must receive you, if only for my sake, if only—'

'No,' interrupted Margherita firmly, and with a strange mixture of proud humility and stern bitterness; 'there is a gulf between us that cannot be crossed. You are the son of a proud line of knightly gentlemen, whose blood is untainted, whose name of Castleton is untarnished by a base-born bride's ever bearing it—and I—what am I? a nameless waif, whose very name as woman can be tossed lightly as the queen of the Trois-Etoiles!

What matter? I am only an actress, the diva of Bohemia, and no wife for a Castleton. 'Loose me!'

But the proud light had leaped to his eyes, the rich blood to his bronzed cheek, that he alone should hold the love of such a heart as this; and he only dropped her hands to fold her close in his arms.

'It is I who am utterly unworthy,' he whispered; 'but at least you cannot take back your heart, or give back mine! This—this my darling to seal thee for ever—mine only.'

He bowed his handsome face to hers, as it lay on his breast, the silky moustache swept her cheek, her lips; and unresisted, her daring lover pressed kiss after kiss upon them, before he suffered her to draw herself from his clasp.

'Leave me—oh leave me now, Albyn! she whispered hurriedly; 'I cannot bear



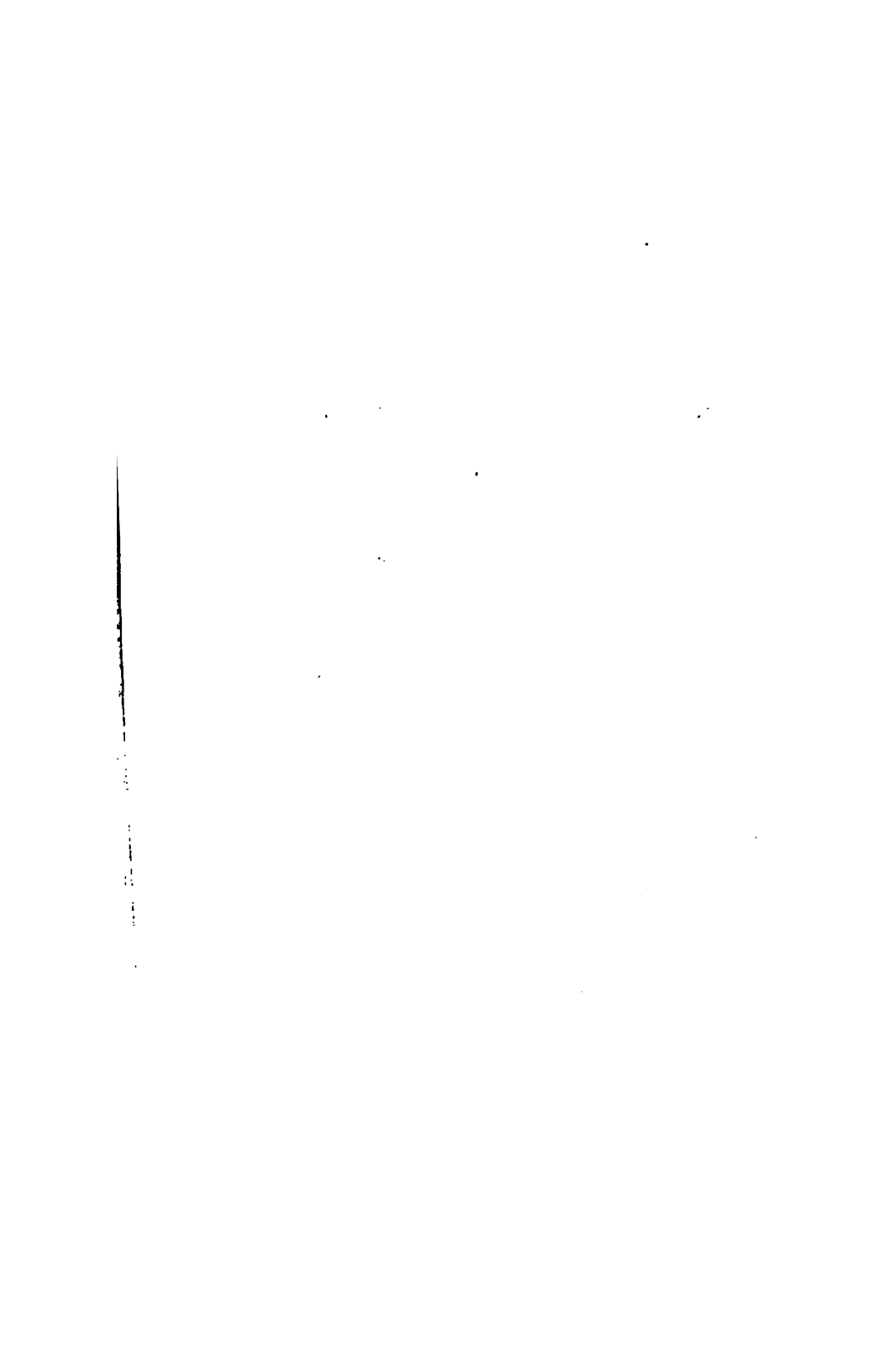
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more—I will see you later about this miserable business.'

'So be it—at Kate's ball, then, to-night.'

The door closed, and the actress was alone.

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